Yale College Council
Proposal for the Expansion
Of Gender-Neutral Housing
to Sophomores

December 2013
Introduction

Throughout the last few years, the Yale College Council has advocated the expansion of gender-neutral housing. This report is the culmination of extensive research, interviews, and survey results conducted over the past few years. After reviewing the data collected during the 2012-2013 gender-neutral housing pilot year for juniors and the information gathered through additional research, along with information synthesized in YCC reports and proposals from previous years, the Yale College Council recommends the expansion of a gender-neutral housing option to the upcoming sophomore 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 academic school year, thirty-nine students from nine out of the twelve residential colleges chose to live in gender-neutral suites. The following year twenty-nine seniors lived in gender-neutral suites (the minor decrease was due to the lack of publicity of the policy). Due to the proven success of gender-neutral housing for seniors for the first two years, in February 2012 the administration agreed with YCC’s recommendation to expand the option to juniors, starting with the Class of 2014.

During the 2012-2013 academic school year, YCC sent out surveys concerning gender-neutral housing to all four class years. The lists of questions are listed at the end of this report. The majority of individuals of the junior and senior class (Classes of 2014 and 2013) that lived in mixed-suites last year gave positive feedback about the gender-neutral suite option and most believe that their experiences in a gender-neutral suite have enhanced their time at Yale. Both members of the freshman and sophomore class at that time (Classes of 2015 and 2016) were overwhelmingly in favor of extending gender-neutral housing to sophomores. Finally, provided in full in Appendix 3 is a response given by Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and DUS of Women's Gender & Sexuality Studies, Melanie Boyd, which was included in the 2011 Proposal for the Expansion of Gender Neutral Housing for juniors. This will hopefully serve as a reminder that more good than harm will come out of this reform.

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 widespread support, with 90% of the surveyed Class of 2016 and 85% of the surveyed Class of 2015 in support of or indifferent to the expansion of gender-neutral housing to the sophomore class.¹

¹ 447 of the 1,356 students in the Class of 2016 responded to the survey, as did 485 of the 1,352 students in Class of 2015.
As such, it appears that many sophomores would want to take advantage of this change in policy next year. In fact, a survey of last year’s juniors and seniors living in gender-neutral housing reveals that about 70% said that they would have considered living in a gender-neutral suite in their sophomore year if the option had been offered. This is evidence that many of the needs and desires that were only met for students in their junior year, were still very much present in their sophomore, and by probable extension, their freshman years.
According to Yale seniors and juniors 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 student explained when asked what their motivation was for utilizing gender-neutral housing, “I wanted to live with my friends. It didn't matter what gender they were. Some just happened to be the opposite gender.” Additionally, students often mentioned that this helped them live with suitemates who they were most comfortable with and had the most similar living styles.

Reviews from students currently living in gender-neutral housing were overwhelmingly positive. Almost no individuals surveyed regretted the decision; in fact, they frequently mentioned that the policy enabled them to have the best living situations possible. One student said, “Living in a gender neutral suite has expanded my horizons and contributed to my personality.” Another student explained, “I personally have really enjoyed living in a gender neutral suite, and would do it again in a heartbeat.” Another student stated, “I have never felt more comfortable in a suite than I do this year. It has been a spectacular experience and by far the best housing arrangement I have ever had!” Almost all of the surveyed juniors and seniors, about 93%, indicated that gender-neutral housing had a positive impact on them.

In fact, the desire to live with friends of other genders has sometimes caused students to live off-campus. In a survey sent out to all juniors in November 2011, 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.” Of the juniors and seniors surveyed living in gender-neutral housing last year, 27.9% said that they knew of students who elected to live off campus because they did not have gender-neutral housing as an option or did not view the University’s offerings as suitable to their needs. However, sophomores are currently not even given the option to move off-campus where they can live in a gender-neutral environment.
Regarding gender, sexuality, gender boundaries and sexual climate, we return to arguments presented in the last Yale College Council report on the expansion of gender neutral housing, as these facts are as true today as they were two years ago, if not more apparent.

**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-queer\(^2\) students. These benefits are seen in four clear ways.

First, gender-based 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 explained in the November 2011 survey, “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-based 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 who lived in a gender-neutral off-campus housing unit explained, “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 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

\(^2\) Gender-queer individuals are people who do not identify as either male or female.
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 in the 2011 interviews, “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 at 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. It was found that while some suites that were interviewed had at least one member who identified as queer, more students interviewed identified as heterosexual.

Gender-neutral housing for sophomores would alleviate many issues surrounding gender and sexuality that exist for underclassmen as well. As one student sums up, “What is the point of non-gender-neutral housing in the first place? To prevent people from living with people who are different from them? That happens anyway. To prevent people from living with people they might be sexually attracted to? That happens anyway. I can understand that all freshmen may not be ready to be thrown into gender-neutral living situations, but I definitely think that any sophomores who want to make that choice should be able to.”

**Gender-Neutral Housing and Sexual Climate**

Drawing upon interviews with students who had lived in gender-neutral housing, we find gender-neutral housing can help form safer environments for students 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 helps to change this expectation by creating a model through which the suite can be a coeducational space in which individuals of other genders socialize in non-sexual ways, decreasing the likelihood for non-consensual 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 said, “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.

Gender-Neutral Housing for Sophomores

By the end of freshman year, most students have a clear feel of the nuances of college life. They have already made some decisions about their friend group and are able to pick their suitemates. Because of the lack of sophomore singles, having a gender-neutral suite can allow students to obtain a more comfortable living arrangement. Upperclassmen have noted that it offers the possibility of a comfortable living arrangement for many students who do not identify as heterosexual at the time they are making their decisions. As do junior and senior students, sophomores might just opt to enter gender-neutral suites due to a simple matter of preference.

This change in housing policy is just as important for sophomores as it was for upperclassmen, if not more so. The current gender-based housing policy puts sophomores, and even freshman, in difficult situations. Currently, almost no gender-neutral living options are open to sophomores considering that sophomore-singles are much less common than sophomore-doubles in most residential colleges and sophomores do not have the option to live off campus as upperclassmen do.

Furthermore, contradictions exist within the current policy in place today. Bathrooms are already gender-neutral: one of the most intimate spaces is currently not gender based, and this is not a decision made by students. This is incompatible with the gender-based suite policy, since a common room is a much more adequate space to share with the opposite gender than the bathroom.

We believe that for many of the same reasons that gender-neutral housing was made available to juniors and seniors, along with the strong interest for expansion among the student body, gender-neutral housing should be made available to sophomores. Although the housing transition as an upperclassman can be somewhat different from that of a sophomore’s between their freshman and sophomore year, only 14% of the surveyed juniors and seniors living in
gender-neutral housing last year believed sophomores were not mature enough to live in gender-neutral suites and 70% indicated that they would have considered a gender-neutral suite their sophomore year. One surveyed upperclassman living in gender-neutral housing last year even noted, “Gender neutral is great and I really wish I had the option during sophomore year. It might have actually saved a friendship or two.”

![Pie chart showing responses to the question: Do you believe sophomores are mature enough to live in gender-neutral suites?]

- Yes: 62%
- Unsure: 24%
- No: 14%

Implementation

The Yale College Council believes that implementing a gender-neutral housing policy for the sophomore class would be feasible for the upcoming year. Most sophomore housing involves double-occupancy rooms within a suite, so the rule would still hold that sophomores are unable to share a room with someone of a different gender. Some suites within each residential college would be designated as potentially gender-neutral due to their configuration of single- and double-occupancy rooms, and in the interest of fairness, all would have access to these suites. There is of course an inherent risk in choosing to enter the housing draw as a mixed suite in the event that the gender-neutral suites are over-subscribed. If this were the case, students in this situation would need to reconfigure their group. In circumstances where a gender-neutral living space is vital, singles could be offered to those sophomores that were unable to obtain a gender-neutral suite.

The Yale College Council’s first recommendation is that sophomore gender-neutral housing be open to the entire sophomore class under the same guidelines that currently apply to juniors and seniors. However, if this seems unfeasible, the YCC offers a second recommendation: limited sophomore gender-neutral housing. This model exists within Harvard’s current system of gender-neutral housing, which provides mixed gender suites on a case-by-case basis, under special circumstances. The same rules that juniors and seniors have would apply to sophomores, except that sophomores would have to submit a petition before they submit the housing form that requests a gender-neutral suite. Deans or Masters of each residential college
would grant or deny permission. The basis of their decision should be the assessed maturity level of applicants, the relationship the group requesting holds, and the possible consequences that not living in that configuration could bring. Authorities would inform applicants of their decision around a month before the housing forms are due, to allow possible changes. Once approved, students could enter the room lottery as any other suite.

While this appears to be a theoretically sound alternative, the YCC feels that this model could create uncomfortable situations for those not wanting to divulge specific information about their desires to live in a gender-neutral suite. This situation could also stigmatize those sophomores living in gender-neutral suites as “special circumstances.” Although this option would be better than the current state of housing available to sophomores, we believe that this is not the best option, especially considering the more progressive direction in which our peer institutions are moving (Appendix 2 shows that most of Yale’s peer institutions already have this option available to sophomores, juniors and seniors). Therefore our primary recommendation is the complete expansion to the entire sophomore class.

Conclusion

Yale’s history with gender-neutral housing has been a success. Upperclassmen who have had the opportunity to take advantage of this policy have not only enjoyed their more comfortable living situations, but many also felt that they grew in some way from their experience. Aside from providing the comforts of living with one’s friends, which is a significant motivation for many students, mixed-gender suites offer something more.

Gender-neutral housing is unique in that it does not force students into any undesirable living situations. It offers a space for those who choose not to limit themselves by the constructs of gender and sexuality, yet still allows for more traditional living arrangements. On the other hand, gender-based housing in its current form has the potential to isolate students and provide discomfort. It does this by ignoring the existence of homosexuality on campus, implying that same-sex socialization is the norm, and creating difficult situations for both gender-queer and trans students.

Not only would gender-neutral housing solve several gender-based issues on campus, but it could also benefit campus social life by reducing gender boundaries and creating better understanding between the sexes. It also has the potential to result in a safer sexual climate on campus by desexualizing the suite and increasing an understanding of the ways in which people experience relationships.

A majority of upperclassmen living in gender-neutral housing noted that they would have considered living in a gender-neutral suite their sophomore year if the option had been available, making clear that this is a living style that is desirable. There is no doubt that sophomores want a gender-neutral housing option for many of the same reasons that upperclassmen wanted one. Yet, what is exceptional is that there are currently no gender-neutral living scenarios available to sophomores without having to wholly depart from Yale, considering that sophomore singles are limited in many residential colleges and off-campus housing is not an option for sophomores.
Withholding the expansion of gender-neutral housing insinuates that sophomores are significantly less mature than their upperclassmen counterparts. If one’s assessment of maturity is based upon the potential for mishandling relationships of a sexual nature within a suite, this assessment does not account for the fact that homosexual students have for years demonstrated the ability to live responsibly and healthily in a suite where sexual relationships could develop as early as freshman year. Towards the end of their freshman year, rising sophomores have a firm understanding of college life, their social circles, and their living styles, which should provide them with enough knowledge to make a decision about their future living circumstances. Despite the current gender-based housing arrangement for sophomores, students are still expected to share gender-neutral bathrooms – a much more intimate environment than a common room.

The implementation of gender-neutral housing is both moral and feasible. Students entering the lottery as a mixed-gender suite would be made aware of the inherent risks of having gender-neutral suites over-subscribed, in which case they could reconfigure or, in special circumstances, be provided with a stand-alone single. YCC fully supports its first recommendation to provide gender-neutral housing options to the entire sophomore class, but does offer, with reservations, the possibility of a second more limited option.

Gender-neutral housing has been a positive experience for those who have chosen to utilize it, allowing juniors and seniors to live comfortably and with their closest friends. The upcoming sophomore class would similarly benefit from the expansion of this policy. We believe that gender-neutral housing for sophomores is widely welcomed and could be feasibly implemented. The Yale College Council urges the administration to continue its efforts to improve living situations on campus and extend the gender-neutral housing policy to the current sophomore class.
Appendix 1: The 2012-2013 Academic Year Survey Questions

127 students living in gender-neutral suites from the Class of 2013 and the Class of 2014 were surveyed. They were asked the following questions:

(1) Has gender-neutral housing positively impacted your residential experience?
(2) Given the option, would you have considered a gender-neutral suite your sophomore year?
(3) Do you believe sophomores are mature enough to live in gender-neutral suites?
(4) Do you know of students who elected to live off campus because they didn’t have gender-neutral housing as an option or didn’t view the university’s offerings as suitable to their needs?
(5) What was your motivation for utilizing gender-neutral housing?
(6) Please share any additional commentary or opinions below:

447 students in Yale’s freshman class responded to a survey sent out to the entire Class of 2015. 485 students in Yale’s sophomore class responded to a survey sent out to the entire Class of 2016. Students were asked the following questions:

(1) Would you support extending the option of gender-neutral housing to sophomores?
Appendix 2: Gender-Neutral Housing Across Peer Institutions

- At Brown University, sophomores, juniors, and seniors 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. Expansion to freshman is being explored.

- Columbia University has an Open Housing Policy, which allows sophomores, juniors, and seniors to elect their roommate and suitemates regardless of gender.

- At Cornell University, specific residence halls and buildings are designated as gender-neutral open only to upperclassmen that must apply.

- 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. These options are available to sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

- Harvard University addresses gender-neutral housing on a case-by-case basis, under specific circumstances.

- 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.

- Princeton University has made the option available in multiple residence halls to rising juniors and seniors. The only gender-neutral options for sophomores are singles. For entering freshmen that are not comfortable specifying their gender identity, contacts are available at the LGBT Center.
Appendix 3: Letter from Melanie Boyd, Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and DUS of Women's Gender & Sexuality Studies

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December 17, 2011

Joseph Yagoda and Isabel Santos-Gonzalez
Committee on Gender-Neutral Housing
Yale College Council

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 suite-mate 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
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