

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Students

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### How Colleges Assign Roommates, and Why It Matters

*By Beckie Supiano*

In the coming weeks, throngs of new freshmen will descend on campuses across the country. For many traditional students, going off to college means living with a roommate for the first time. That got us wondering: How are colleges assigning roommates these days, and does it really matter?

We caught up with Bruce Sacerdote, a professor of economics at Dartmouth College who has studied the effects roommates have on each other, to find out. The following conversation has been edited and condensed.

**Q. How do colleges usually pair roommates, and how has that changed over time?**

**A.** The traditional thing was to ask students a set of questions about their interests, and if they had a request for dorms or particular roommates, and use those to put people together. And then, about 20 years ago, they hit on the idea that maybe we should just randomize, maybe that would be more fair and more fun. And so a number of places started doing that.

I'm not claiming that Dartmouth was an innovator, but it certainly began doing that because it wanted to have a more diverse mix on hallways and within rooms. And the military academies that I've studied a bunch and my coauthors have studied a ton — they've done it perfectly randomly for a long time.

**Q. Has there been some shift in how roommates are assigned more recently?**

**A.** Any number of institutions have called me and talked about the fact that they're going toward randomization rather than away, because they see the benefits. It actually stimulates cross-geographic, cross-race, cross-cultural interaction.

**Q. I've also heard of new systems that are supposed to let freshmen pick their own roommates. That's still uncommon?**

**A.** That's a relatively new trend. That could be going on at the same time that the trend toward randomization is, so some colleges may be allowing you to pick your own, and then some are going more toward randomization. I don't know which one's going to win. You'll probably end up with half doing pure randomization and half doing pure picking based on a Match.com algorithm.

**Q. Tell me more about your research on college roommates.**

**A.** I started out just simply noting that they were randomly assigned, and then seeing how much they would influence each other with regard to their GPA and their study habits. Then I branched out into things like drinking and joining fraternities and sticking with their varsity athletic team. And now it's been broadened not only by me, but by other folks, to think about how does it influence your attitudes. If you come from a very white place and you room with an African-American student, how did that influence your attitudes toward affirmative action, toward people of different races, and actually your willingness to room with those folks in the future.

And interestingly there's where you see the biggest development, on drinking behavior and socializing behavior and, to some degree, study behavior. You see very modest effects on grade-point average and such. There's also a lot of influence on job choice, so if

you happen to get someone who's interested in finance, it makes you significantly more likely to pursue that both in internships and as a career.

**Q. Based on those findings, what method of roommate selection do you think is best for students?**

**A.** My coauthors, Scott Carrell and Jim West, and I decided that pure randomization is ideal because you get that unexpected mixing that you would not otherwise have.

At one point, Scott and Jim convinced the Air Force Academy — since there is this influence of roommates — we could reduce the number of cadets who drop out if we explicitly assigned students to squadrons in a way that would maximize their GPA and minimize their chance of dropping out.

It failed spectacularly because the students resisted the groups we tried to form, and we ended up with a clump of very super academically prepared students only talking to each other, and the least academically prepared students in the same squadron only talking to each other. We actually had a negative impact on overall GPA.

Because predicting the outcomes from true social engineering is pretty difficult, and because randomization has these nice properties of being fair and creating a ton of mixing, there's no reason that we shouldn't do that.

**Q. It also seems as if randomly assigned roommates are a boon for researchers.**


**A.** That's super helpful, too. Most of my work — I do a lot of other things besides roommates, of course — has some element of randomization, so you can try to make some causal statements about what's going on, as opposed to just selection.

## Q. What was your freshman-roommate experience like?



A. I just saw my roommate last month at my 25th reunion. A guy named Henry Todd. He had a tremendous impact on me, encouraging me to travel, try different things, branch out, consider joining a Greek house. He definitely made me more social. And I know a whole group of friends that I would not know at all were it not for my connection to Henry.


*Beckie Supiano writes about college affordability, the job market for new graduates, and professional schools, among other things.*


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**hhopf** · 6 hours ago

What I'd be interested in is how often pairings fail (change of roommate mid-year). Is there a best method for basic compatibility?


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**MyCollegeRoomie** → hhopf · an hour ago

Pairing fail quite often! In fact, schools that use a matching software (MyCollegeRoomie) note that room change requests decrease on average of 60%! That is staggering!


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**22031719** · 5 hours ago

But a mid-year change of roommates does not necessarily indicate a pairing failure or incompatibility. Reasons can be innocent and myriad.


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**MChag12** → 22031719 · 4 hours ago

And using military academies for comparison and examples seems silly. These are a subset of particularly homogenous students with similar interests that can hardly be applied to mainstream colleges. As for the real benefits of these kinds of studies, Dartmouth anyone? Perhaps the study of admissions comes before assigning roommates.

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**susangross** · 4 hours ago

When is freedom to choose ever a bad thing? But if students can't select someone they know, officials should at least try to match by interests and

<http://chronicle.com/article/How-Colleges-Assign-Roommates/232161/>

Page 4 of 9

compatibility. You can still get a mix of cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds. Dorms are no longer overseen by university officials who make sure rules are kept. Forcing freshmen - many already nervous about being away from home - to live even one semester with someone who breaks the regulations against drugs, alcohol and sex will have a definite impact on that freshman's GPA. And then there's the very good possibility that the errant roommate will influence the non-rule breaker - rather than the preferred opposite result. Students need as much security as possible their freshman year - random selection doesn't give that. As a point of reference, I had both my own choice of roommates and a random choice - I stuck with both, but definitely had to find friends elsewhere with the random choice. My children only had random choices - none worked out, but both had successful situations when they chose their own the following year.

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**laura639** → susangross · 2 hours ago

Three years ago, my eldest daughter had a randomly-assigned roommate (party girl from NYC) who did drugs and had groups of guys in the room at all hours. My daughter didn't feel safe in her room (at least twice some of the roommate's drunken high male friends tried to climb in bed with my sleeping daughter). The school did nothing and refused to let my daughter move until after the semester had ended since "learning to get along with others from different backgrounds is a valuable life lesson." My daughter got sick from lack of sleep and failed all but one class that semester, and decided to leave college entirely after that. She now lives at home and works but I wonder if having a different roommate would have changed the course of her life.

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**susangross** → laura639 · an hour ago

I can relate. My son's roommate brought home different partners at least two or three times a week and a suite-mate smoked so much marijuana that the whole place reeked and gave him constant headaches - there was no place to study or sleep. The housing office refused to intervene, saying he needed to learn negotiating skills. My son didn't fail, but he didn't make the GPA needed to keep his scholarship, which meant he had to transfer to a more affordable school. He has ended up well, but he took a round-about way to get there and I often wonder what would have happened had he had a more compatible roommate in the first place OR if the housing officials enforced the rules - no sex, no alcohol, no drugs.

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**MyCollegeRoomie** → susangross · 44 minutes ago

Where did your son attend school? Hopefully they are looking at a service like My College Roomie to help prevent things like this from happening!

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**MyCollegeRoomie** → laura639 · 44 minutes ago

Sounds like your daughter could have really benefitted from a service like My College Roomie. Where did she go to school?

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**mbelvadi** → susangross · an hour ago



Freedom to choose is often a bad thing when people self-select themselves into intellectual and social silos that undermine the institution's attempt to benefit from creating a culturally diverse student community.

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**MyCollegeRoomie** → susangross · an hour ago

You'd like MyCollegeRoomie. We allow student to use a social networking environment to find out about each other. We use a compatibly survey to suggest matches, and we allow the students to mutually select their own roommates!

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**willynilly** · 3 hours ago

Carefully managed selection or natural selection (randomization) - which works best? And how is "best" defined? Any recent research completed on this topic? Or do colleges and researchers have more pressing matters to deal with?

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**MyCollegeRoomie** → willynilly · 42 minutes ago

I think best is defined by student room change requests, retention, grades, and satisfaction - all of which are improved when a school uses a service like My College Roomie.

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**Reythia** · 3 hours ago

I'm sorry, but this is really naive. Sure, randomization works out fine for some. And for others, it's a total disaster -- one which could easily have been avoided by asking a few questions about how people like to live.

I have a friend who is a self-admitted slob. Her apartments have always been utter disasters. She had a freshman year random roommate who was a neat-freak. Yeah, THAT didn't end well. Her sophomore year, she picked another girl who she knew. Since both of them were messy, they roomed happily together.

I had another friend in college whose random roommate would regularly bring home different guys at night, and proceed to have sex loudly and obviously -- sometimes in my friend's bed rather than her own! My friend wasn't a prude, but she also was fond of a little more privacy, less constant drunkenness, and a lot more respect.

For myself, I was an engineering student, taking 5 hard classes my first semester plus marching band. Needless to say, I had a lot of homework to do at night and on weekends, and a lot of it had to be done on my computer in my room. My random freshman roommate was a sociology major taking just three

see more

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**22031719** → Reythia · an hour ago

All too often, students entering their first college year have mother or father hovering over them as they answer questionnaires of the sort Reythia suggests. The "idealized" disinformation that can result has led to many a bad intentional pairing by schools.

(At this point in the summer, by the way, US universities are being bombarded by urgent parents who are distraught about the FaceBook

page of the person assigned to share a room with their own dear little angel this fall.)

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**Reythia** → 22031719 · an hour ago

Sure. No kid's going to answer honestly about things like sex with their folks looking over their shoulder. Agreed.

On the other hand, they WILL tend to answer honestly about a lot of other basic, useful things:

- 1.) Neatness
- 2.) Preferred weekend sleep hours
- 3.) Number of credits taken the first semester (an estimate of homework amount)
- 4.) Interest in parties, large socializations, and/or big extracurriculars

Frankly, I'd even suggest partnering up by major, when possible. At least that way you'll have similar levels of homework at the same time. Not to mention, that way you've got at least a chance for a study buddy right from the start.

So yeah, I know that a quick survey won't give perfect matches. But it's got a better chance at giving tolerable matches than just random chance. And, again, if the issue is to encourage "diversity", having a short list of basic questions won't have any impact on that at all.

So why NOT do it?

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**MyCollegeRoomie** → Reythia · 41 minutes ago

Can't agree more Reythia. I think you'd be interested in learning more about My College Roomie and the tools we give students to see who they may be compatible with! Then they have the freedom to choose who they'd like to live with!

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**MyCollegeRoomie** → Reythia · 42 minutes ago

Can't agree more! That's why we give students the tools to select their own roommates based on many factors of compatibility!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**22178056** · 2 hours ago

Most universities outside the US solve the roommate problem by giving students their own rooms. Not only does it work really well, but for those students who are introverts and, therefore, more studious, it provides a private place to retreat whenever outside distractions get to be too much. I hated having roommates in college and was so relieved my senior year to move off campus and finally have a room of my own.

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**22031719** → 22178056 · 2 hours ago

Although most students in Western Europe occupy single rooms, such is certainly not true in most of the rest of the world. Six or even eight to a room is not uncommon at Chinese universities, for example.

(Westerners attending Chinese universities get much better digs than do local students, of course.) Universities in at least one southeastern European country have featured three-to-a-room residence halls.

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**thmed** → 22178056 · 2 hours ago

I agree. I had a very opposite schedule and habits of my roommate my first semester, changed to someone I knew the second. Did well, then she transferred. I took a few year off and when I returned was old enough to talk them into letting me live in a graduate dorm that had single rooms. Joy! No schedules to match, no one to be considerate of, no one to curse for not being considerate of me. All phone calls for me!

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**sand6432** · an hour ago

Gays and lesbians can presumably live in the same rooms in college, but heterosexuals of the opposite sex cannot. Is this discrimination?---Sandy Thatcher

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**sand6432** · an hour ago

When I entered Princeton in 1961, diversity wasn't an issue: of a class of over 800, there was just one black, four Asians, and one person of Middle East origin. It was then an all-male, lily white school. My freshman roommate, Jeffrey MacDonald, later became (in)famous for allegedly killing his wife and two young daughters, a story that has been the subject of at least four books including Joe McGinniss's best-selling "Fatal Vision." For the record, i have always believed Jeff to be innocent and the victim of a justice system gone awry, as detailed in Errol Morris's "A Wilderness of Error" (2011).---Sandy Thatcher

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**csgirl** · an hour ago

My university was assigning roommates randomly even back in the dino days, and it led to a lot of horrible things. I knew gay students who were bullied by their roommates, kids in the engineering program who couldn't study or even sleep because of roommates who partied incessantly or brought in people to spend the night, a kid who got stuck with a heroin addict who was letting in dealers at all hours. I think around a third of the pairings my freshman year failed.

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**MyCollegeRoomie** → csgirl · 39 minutes ago

Agreed csgirl. Schools need to get on board with services like My College Roomie. It's an effective tool to reduce a lot of these issues. In fact, we see that room change requests drop over 60% just by allowing students to use this tool to meet and select their own roommates!

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**MyCollegeRoomie** · an hour ago

MyCollegeRoomie seeks to mitigate a lot of the risks of randomized matching. We feel that allowing students to select their own roommates based on compatibility provides students with higher college success and satisfaction rates.

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