

The Implementation of Gender-Neutral Housing: A Mixed-Methods Study Across ACUHO-I Member Institutions

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Abstract:

Gender-neutral housing has recently become an option at colleges and universities across the U.S. Chief housing officers at Association of College and University Housing Officers-International member institutions were surveyed online about the status of gender-neutral housing at their respective campuses, using an instrument adapted by the researchers from the 1979 work of DeCoster on coeducational housing. Gender-neutral housing has been discussed or considered at most (approximately 85.6%) of the 306 responding campuses; only about 14.4% of responding institutions reported that they had not considered it at all. When obstacles were encountered, the most common were lack of suitable housing facilities, public relations concerns, lack of upper-level support, and lack of student interest. Existing gender-neutral housing policies at responding institutions were analyzed for themes.

Keywords: Gender-neutral housing | housing | ACUHO-I | co-educational housing

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GENDER-NEUTRAL HOUSING has recently become an option at colleges and universities across the U.S. Chief housing officers at Association of College and University Housing Officers-International member institutions were surveyed online about the status of gender-neutral housing at their respective campuses, using an instrument adapted by the researchers from the 1979 work of DeCoster on coeducational housing. Gender-neutral housing has been discussed or considered at most (approximately 85.6%) of the 306 responding campuses; only about 14.4% of responding institutions reported that they had not considered it at all. When obstacles were encountered, the most common were lack of suitable housing facilities, public relations concerns, lack of upper-level support, and lack of student interest. Existing gender-neutral housing policies at responding institutions were analyzed for themes.

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Coeducational housing, whether by wing, floor, or room, in American colleges and universities was first introduced in the early 1960s (DeCoster, 1979) and became increasingly prevalent by the late 1970s (DeCoster, 1979; Willoughby, Carroll, Marshall, & Clark, 2009). Over a period of a little more than 10 years (from 1967 to 1978), the number of higher education institutions offering coeducational housing increased from 51% to 85%; in addition, the percentage of campus housing that was designated coeducational increased, such that 42% of responding institutions in 1978 indicated that three-fourths or more of their housing facilities were coed (DeCoster, 1979). A study published in 2009 reported that more than 90% of students living in college housing lived in coeducational housing (Willoughby et al., 2009).

More recently, a new option for college housing emerged: gender-neutral housing (GNH). Gender-neutral housing (also sometimes called gender-inclusive housing, gender-blind housing, sex-neutral housing, or open housing) refers to the practice of allowing students of different biological sexes to share college housing, such as the same apartment, suite, or room (Miyamoto, 2006). In

Whereas sex is a biological concept, gender is a cultural concept. Gender identity is one's internal sense of who one is, which may or may not match one's biological sex. As the understanding of gender has become more nuanced, the need has arisen for college and university housing to recognize more than the biological sex of campus residents.

part, this housing option has developed in response to the growing understanding that sex and gender are not the same. Whereas sex is a biological concept, gender is a cultural concept (Newhouse, 2013; Stryker, 2008). Gender identity is one's internal sense of who one is, which may or may not match one's biological sex (Stryker, 2008). As the understanding of gender has become more nuanced, the need has arisen for college and university housing to recognize more than the biological sex of campus residents.

DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER-NEUTRAL HOUSING

Gender-neutral housing has been a topic of discussion in college and university student housing for the past decade. A 2003 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* noted the implementation of what it deemed “a ‘gender blind’ hall, apparently the first transgender college housing in the nation” (Hoover, 2003, para. 1). Not too long afterward, Bleiberg (2004) advocated for the practice in a “Point of View” in *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, arguing that it is “the next step in the progression of inclusive policies at colleges and universities” (p. 8). ACUHO-I's *Talking Stick* first explored the topic of GNH in 2006 (Miyamoto, 2006); at that time, readers' feedback indicated a desire to hear more about it (Miyamoto, 2007). In 2007 Miyamoto indicated that “gender-neutral housing options have developed slowly, expanding more rapidly in the past five years” (p. 43). The *ACUHO-I Standards and Ethical Principles for College & University Housing Professionals* publication (Association of College and University Housing Officers-International, 2014) also addressed GNH by including a standard that

college and university housing administrations “create gender-neutral specific housing where feasible” (p. 14).

There is, however, limited information about how GNH is actually being implemented or even how many institutions offer this housing option. The College Equality Index (CEI, n.d.) lists 38 schools that offer GNH, though they provide no definition of what GNH is considered to be. Clark (2009) examined the ACUHO-I housing assignments survey, based on responses from more than 180 participants, and reported that approximately 30% of respondents had some form of gender-neutral housing. Based on the number of responses to that survey, this would indicate that approximately 54 of the responding institutions offered this option in some form. Most recently, the Campus Pride Trans Policy Clearinghouse (2015) reported that 199 colleges and universities offer GNH (as of October 23, 2015), though the methodology used to obtain this number is not reported. Campus Pride's definition of what they prefer to call gender-inclusive housing is stated as “housing in which students can have a roommate of any gender” (para. 1). The research literature on GNH is extremely sparse. Willoughby, Larsen, and Carroll (2012) explored the prevalence of gender-neutral housing in a sample of 148 higher education institutions obtained in two separate samples. The first sample was of the 100 U.S. universities with the largest enrollment that offered on-campus housing. The second sample was of 48 institutions that offered GNH but were not included in the first sample; this list was generated by “a referral, snowball sampling method where schools that were contacted for having gender-neutral

housing were asked to identify other universities that offered gender-neutral housing” (p. 736). Of this sampling they commented, “While likely not an inclusive list of all universities with gender-neutral housing in the United States, this sample included schools of various sizes, locations, and affiliations and is likely representative of most schools that offer gender-neutral housing” (p. 736). They also found “the actual formalized and official practice of gender-neutral housing at large

more politically liberal and less religious (Willoughby et al., 2012).

Willoughby et al. (2012) also analyzed gender-neutral housing policies at the 48 institutions in their smaller sample (chosen because they offered GNH). They found that many institutions offered this housing option only “on a case-by-case basis and a handful only offered it to transgender students” (p. 742). They identified three patterns in the policies they analyzed. First, GNH “was typically closely connected with sexual minority groups on campus. . . . Thus, gender-neutral [housing] provided an important service to this specific student minority population” (p. 742). Second, most institutions had some sort of screening policy for GNH, typically additional application paperwork. Third, most institutions had restrictions on who could live in gender-neutral housing. “By far, the most common restriction mentioned was related to age. In almost every case of gender-neutral housing documented, universities restricted access to only returning or non-freshman students” (Willoughby et al., 2012, p. 742). In addition, a few institutions specifically banned or discouraged romantic couples from living in gender-neutral housing.

Krum, Davis, and Galupo (2013) analyzed the housing policies at 18 colleges and universities in the U.S. and described five different housing styles in which gender-neutral housing typically is offered (pp. 66–68): same room/different sex pairings (students sharing the same room with a roommate of any gender or identity); apartment style (each resident is able to lock the door to their own room); gender identity assignment (students of the same gender identity live together); evenly split groups (students apply to GNH in groups that

Gender-neutral housing was defined as housing in which a unit (room, suite, apartment) is not occupied by individuals of the same biological (legal) sex.

American universities to be rather limited” (Willoughby et al., 2012, p. 737), with only 16 of the 100 large universities that they surveyed offering this option. They reported, however, that, among those institutions in the large university sample that did not offer gender-neutral housing, 13% were engaged in formal discussion about introducing it. They also reported that campuses offering GNH were predominantly on the East Coast, West Coast, and in the Midwest and that those institutions where discussions to add GNH were taking place were primarily in those geographic areas as well. They speculated that this geographic split might be attributed to these areas being

Whereas some institutions have very well-developed and detailed gender-neutral housing policies, others have policies that are quite rudimentary or even lack them altogether. Some institutions do not have a formal, detailed policy regarding GNH but, rather, consider requests for GNH on a case-by-case basis.

are evenly split by legal sex to share an apartment but share a bedroom only with someone of the same legal sex); and self-contained single rooms (which the authors acknowledged may or may not be considered gender-neutral housing).

Providing GNH as an option is a practice that has been advocated by many scholars and researchers as a way to serve transgender students (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, & Smith, 2005; Bleiberg, 2004; Finger, 2010; Gintoli, 2010; Hoffman, 2012; Pettitt, 2010). The option is needed for several reasons, one of which is that “Old protocols based on a gender-divided system cannot comfortably accommodate transgender students” (Pettitt, 2010, p. 37). In fact, as noted by Krum et al. (2013), the gender segregation of housing “is often the most difficult to amend” (p. 65).

The availability of GNH can promote a greater sense of inclusion and safety for transgender students (Beemyn et al., 2005), as well as for gender-nonconforming students (Henneman, 2003). Of the 100 transgender respondents in Krum et al.’s (2013) study who had attended college, 39% reported that their college offered gender-neutral housing; 46.15% of those 39 students reported that the availability of GNH influenced their decision to attend that institution.

However, GNH frequently is not offered exclusively to transgender students (Krum et al., 2013) and can be of benefit to other students as well (Bleiberg, 2004; Miyamoto, 2006). GNH can offer a “safe space” for some gay, lesbian, and bisexual students for whom “living with a member of the same sex can be an extremely uncomfortable and awkward situation” (Bleiberg, 2004, p. 4), and offering GNH as a housing option would help to meet the needs not only of LGBT students but of all students:

Relationships between members of the opposite sex can be a truly educational experience. . . . Platonic friendships existing between men and women can provide educational and developmental opportunities for both sexes. . . . The notion that men and women can only be lovers and never friends must be overcome. Residential communities should encourage these bonds in the same way that same-sex bonds are encouraged. (p. 6)

Social scientists have studied the question of whether or not heterosexual men and women can be friends (Booth & Hess, 1974; O’Meara, 1989). Booth and Hess (1974) identified two necessary factors for the development of cross-sex friendships: (1) structural factors that allow close interactions as peers and (2) prevailing social norms. GNH could help promote

both of these factors. This fits nicely with the *ACUHO-I Standards and Ethical Principles for College and University Housing Professionals* (2014), which call for residence life programming that offers “opportunities to develop a mature style of relating to others and live cooperatively with others” (p. 11).

To date, no comprehensive, systematic study of the development and implementation of gender-neutral housing in colleges and universities has been published. It is unknown how many campuses offer this housing option, what types of housing are being used, what barriers campuses have encountered, or what policies have been put in place.

In 1979 DeCoster published an important article capturing the state of coeducational housing during a time when it was emerging as an option on college and university campuses. Bleiberg (2004) and Willoughby et al. (2012) stated that the trend of GNH may be similar to that followed by coeducational housing; therefore, the present study created a comparable look at GNH as it emerges as a practice.

The purpose of this study was to examine the current state of consideration and implementation of GNH at ACUHO-I member institutions. The specific research questions for this study were as follows:

- (1) What is the current state of implementation of gender-neutral housing at ACUHO-I member institutions? How many have considered this option? How many have implemented it?
- (2) At those institutions where gender-neutral housing has been considered, what obstacles were encountered?
- (3) At those institutions where gender-neutral housing is offered, what type(s) of housing facilities are used to offer this option?

- (4) At those institutions where gender-neutral housing is offered, what policies and procedures have been implemented?

METHODS

Participants and Data Collection

The Research Committee of ACUHO-I endorsed this research study. ACUHO-I emailed the invitation to participate in the study (with an embedded link to the survey instrument) to the chief housing officers (CHOs) or designated contacts at member institutions ($N = 943$). Two follow-up emails were sent by ACUHO-I over a period of one month, and 343 institutions responded, for a response rate of 36.4%. Only 17 of the responding institutions were international institutions; because this number was too small to permit meaningful analysis, those institutions were excluded from the analyses reported in this study. Therefore, all tables and analyses reflect U.S. institutions only. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the responses by institutional size.

Table 1

Size of Responding Institutions

	<i>n</i>	%
Less than 1,000	9	2.93
1,000–4,999	96	31.27
5,000–9,999	73	23.78
10,000–19,999	62	20.20
20,000 and above	67	21.82
Total	307	10

Note: Not all participants completed this question.

Table 2**Type of Institution of Respondents Compared to ACUHO-I U.S. Membership**

Type of institution	Responses		ACUHO-I total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
2-year	8	2.61	58	6.43
4-year	299	97.71	826	91.57
Public	146	47.71	491	44.68
Private	114	37.25	403	54.43

Note: Multiple responses allowed.

Table 3**Responses by ACUHO-I Region Compared to ACUHO-I U.S. Membership**

Region	Responses		ACUHO-I total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
AIMHO	10	3.29	52	5.76
GLACUHO	47	15.46	109	12.08
MACUHO	48	15.79	116	12.86
NEACUHO	47	15.46	161	17.85
NWACUHO	14	4.61	59	6.54
SEAHO	54	17.76	168	18.63
SWACUHO	20	6.58	59	6.54
UMR-ACUHO	37	12.17	112	12.42
WACUHO	27	8.88	66	7.32
Total	304	100.00	902	100.00

Note: Not all participants indicated a region.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the breakdown of the responding institutions in terms of public/private and two-year/four-year, ACUHO-I region, and housing capacity compared to ACUHO-I membership overall (with institutions outside the U.S. removed from both totals). Eight respondents indicated that they were from single-sex institutions (seven all female and one all male). Three institutions were Native American Serving/Tribal Colleges, and 19 were Hispanic Serving Institutions; there were no responses from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Forty-eight respondents indicated that their institution was religiously affiliated. (Comparison information for these categories was not available from ACUHO-I.)

In comparison to ACUHO-I institutional members in the U.S., under-representation was found among two-year (2.61% versus 6.43%) and private (37.25% versus 54.43%) institutions. We also examined members by region for the Association of Intermountain Housing Officers (AIMHO), Great Lakes Association of College and University Housing Officers (GLACUHO), Mid-Atlantic Association of College and University Housing Officers (MACUHO), Northeast Association of College and University Housing Officers (NEACUHO), Northwest Association of College & University Housing Officers (NWACUHO), Southeastern Association of Housing Officers (SEAHO), Southwest Association of College & University Housing Officers (SWACUHO), Upper Midwest Region-Association of College & University Housing Officers (UMR-ACUHO), and

Table 4

Responses by Housing Capacity Compared to ACUHO-I U.S. Membership

	Responses		ACUHO-I total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
0-500	26	8.50	155	17.20
501-750	19	6.21	78	8.66
751-1,000	19	6.21	90	9.99
1,001-1,500	44	14.38	120	13.32
1,501-2,000	32	10.46	98	10.88
2,001-3,000	45	14.70	122	13.54
3,001-4,000	37	12.09	82	9.10
4,001-6,000	41	13.40	69	7.66
6,001 or more	43	14.05	87	9.65
Total	306	100.00	901	100.00

Note: Not all participants indicated housing capacity.

Western Association of College and University Housing Officers (WACUHO). The following regions were under-represented: AIMHO (3.29% versus 5.76%); NEACUHO (15.46% versus 17.85%); NWACUHO (4.61% versus 6.54%); and UMR-ACUHO (12.17% versus 12.42%). Finally, the three smallest housing capacity categories were under-represented: 0-500 (8.50% versus 17.20%); 501-750 (6.21% versus 8.66%); and 751-1,000 (6.21% versus 9.99%), with only the smallest being seriously under-represented. All other responses for institutional type, region, and housing capacity were over-represented.

Instrument

The *Gender-Neutral Housing Survey* instrument used in this study was adapted from the questions used in DeCoster's (1979) study of coeducational student housing in higher education. The DeCoster survey was used as a template, given its relevance to undergraduate living conditions and its focus on gendered housing arrangements. The DeCoster survey consisted of three multiple answer items questioning the configuration of coeducational housing facilities. The *Gender-Neutral Housing Survey* expanded DeCoster's survey to a total of 13 items aimed at uncovering policies regarding housing arrangements for unmarried students of various genders and gender identities. Twelve items in the instrument were formatted as multiple choice/multiple answer items, while one item allowed for an open answer response. Gender-neutral housing was defined as housing in which a unit (room, suite, apartment) is not occupied by individuals of the same biological (legal) sex.

The items in the *Gender-Neutral Housing Survey* were developed to provide data in three distinct areas. Seven of the survey items solicited descriptive data about each participating institution. (Sample item: "What is the size of your institution?") Another portion of the instrument, two survey items, explored the content of discussions about the introduction of GNH facilities on ACUHO-I campuses. (Sample item: "To what extent has your institution considered implementing gender-neutral housing?") The remaining four items in the

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survey assessed the form, function, policies, and procedures related to GNH arrangements. (Sample item: "Please indicate the types of gender-neutral housing facilities that are being utilized on your campus.") These four items were presented only to respondents who indicated that their institution currently provides some form of gender-neutral housing options for unmarried students.

Analysis

This mixed-methods study was designed to be an exploratory assessment of GNH housing options and policies. As such, the quantitative data collected from the *Gender-Neutral Housing Survey* was analyzed using simple descriptive statistics.

Qualitative data in the form of GNH policies were also collected and analyzed for themes. First, all of the policies were read to gain a general, overall sense of the data (Creswell, 2009). Initial codes were developed as they emerged from the data (Creswell, 2009;

Lichtman, 2013). A constant comparative approach was used during the coding and analysis to identify categories and then critical concepts (Lichtman, 2013).

RESULTS

Findings from this study are presented in two components: qualitative and quantitative. Responses focusing on the consideration and implementation of GNH as well as basic demographic information were analyzed in a quantitative format. Examples of policies were analyzed and are presented in a qualitative section.

Extent to Which the Institution Had Considered Gender-Neutral Housing

The question about the extent to which the institution had considered GNH yielded 414 responses from 306 participants (multiple responses were permitted). Trial or pilot programs had been implemented by 15.69% ($n = 48$) of responding institutions. A full GNH program had been implemented by 22.55% ($n = 69$). Informal discussions or conversations with colleagues about GNH had taken place at 32.35% ($n = 100$), and formal discussions or conversations as a topic of a staff meeting had occurred at 24.84% ($n = 77$). Gender-neutral housing had been explored with upper-level administration or counsel and/or the policies at other institutions had been investigated by 25.49% ($n = 78$). Forty-two institutions reported that they had not considered GNH at all.

A larger percentage of institutions in NEACUHO, MACUHO, WACUHO, and GLACUHO had implemented trial or full programs than did those in other regions. None of the responding institutions in SWACUHO ($n = 21$) had implemented either a trial or a full

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Five barriers to implementing gender-neutral housing have been encountered to roughly the same extent: lack of suitable housing facilities, parent/family concerns, public relations concerns, lack of upper-level administrative support, and lack of expressed student interest.

GNH program. See Table 5 for a full report by ACUHO-I region.

Further analysis to identify those institutions indicating that they had both a trial/pilot program and a full program revealed that a total of 117 institutions had *either* a trial/pilot program or a full program, constituting 39.22% of all participating institutions.

Obstacles

To the question concerning obstacles encountered when considering GNH at their institution, 242 participants provided 491 responses (multiple responses were allowed). A lack of suitable facilities (28.93%, $n = 70$), parent/family member concerns (27.27%, $n = 66$), public relations concerns (26.86%, $n = 65$), lack of upper-level administrative support (26.45%, $n = 64$), and lack of student interest (24.79%, $n = 60$) were most commonly indi-

cated as obstacles encountered when considering GNH. Lack of support from the Board of Governors/Trustees/Regents was reported by 15.70% ($n = 38$) of the participants, and legal concerns affected 12.81% ($n = 31$). Only 6.61% ($n = 16$) reported that GNH conflicted with or contradicted their institutional mission statement. No obstacles were reported being encountered by 16.53% ($n = 40$).

The "Other" category offered was selected by 16.94% ($n = 41$) and included reasons such as fear of the unknown, a need for further research or planning before moving forward, a lack of understanding of what GNH really means and encompasses as an initiative, state issues regarding legislation, concern with the definition of gender and sex that is used, and religious traditions or backgrounds of an institution that conflict with GNH.

Table 5

GNH Considerations by ACUHO-I Region

	<i>n</i>	% Response	Not at all	Informal discussions	Formal discussions	Explored options	Trial/pilot program	Full program
AIMHO	13	3.14	0	4	3	3	2	1
GLACUHO	68	16.43	2	18	13	17	8	10
MACUHO	67	16.18	8	15	14	7	8	15
NEACUHO	61	14.73	4	12	6	8	14	17
NWACUHO	20	4.83	1	5	3	4	1	6
SEAHO	72	17.39	10	24	15	16	5	2
SWACUHO	21	5.07	9	4	6	2	0	0
UMR-ACUHO	54	13.04	6	9	14	15	3	7
WACUHO	38	9.18	2	9	3	6	7	11
Total	414	100.00	42	100	77	78	48	69

Note: Multiple responses allowed.

Types of Facilities

The survey question relating to the types of housing facilities being utilized for gender-neutral housing yielded 273 responses from 137 participants (multiple responses were allowed). GNH, as defined by this study and Miyamoto (2006), is housing in which a unit (room, suite, apartment) is not occupied by individuals of the same biological (legal) sex. The type of housing most commonly used for GNH was suites or apartments located on the same floor or unit ($n = 96$, 70.07%). Other popular facilities configurations were students sharing common areas within the same room, suite, or apartment ($n = 91$, 66.42%) and rooms located on the same floor or unit ($n = 58$, 42.34%). Less popular configurations included separate wings ($n = 9$, 6.57%) or floors ($n = 12$, 8.76%) within the same building and separate buildings ($n = 7$, 5.11%) for unmarried students of different genders and gender identities.

Qualitative Analyses of Policies

Those surveyed were asked to provide their gender-neutral housing policies if any existed. Of the 306 institutions that responded, 107 provided information about these policies or links to these policies. A cross-comparative analysis of these responses revealed a wide range of stages of development of GNH policy from “none,” “currently working on,” or “still learning” to very detailed policy statements. Policies then were analyzed and coded as described above, yielding several themes (Cresswell, 2009): eligibility, housing type, the role of parents, and the problem of roommate departure. There were also policies that ventured into the realm of being educational. Because all responses were anonymous, none of the

policies cited here can be attributed to any specific institution.

Eligibility. It was very common for the policies to address the issue of who was eligible to live in gender-neutral housing. The most common restriction related to either age or class standing. For example, policies stated that GNH was open to “upperclass students,” “non-first-year students,” “sophomores-seniors,” or students ages 18 and over. Some variations included “graduate and older students over the age of 22” and class standing (“junior/senior”). Occasionally, policies specified that incoming transfer students also are ineligible to live in gender-neutral housing.

Policies also frequently addressed the issue of romantic couples applying for this housing option. Typically, policies that address this state that the GNH option is not intended for romantic couples, but they also make the point, “However, we respect and honor the privacy of our students, so current open housing procedures [a synonym for GNH] do not require students to disclose the reason for their roommate requests.”

Less frequently, policies mention LGBT students specifically and identify gender-neutral housing as an excellent option for LGBT students “and for students who believe that their gender should not factor into their room/roommate assignment.”

Housing type. Sometimes institutions’ policies specified the type of housing that had been designated gender-neutral:

Gender-neutral/gender-inclusive housing allows friends of different genders to be assigned to the same two-room double, suite or apartment in one of the gender-inclusive designated residences at [institution] during

the academic year. . . . Why were these residences chosen? These residences were chosen because: 1. Each residence has rooms available which allow each roommate to have a separate private sleeping space. 2. These houses offer additional privacy in bathroom and shower areas.

Suites and apartments were most frequently identified as having been designated for gender-neutral housing. A few policies identify the specific buildings by name. Less common were statements that GNH options were available in all upper-division student housing.

Role of parents. Some policies specifically addressed the issue of parents and the idea that they might not approve of their student electing gender-neutral housing. When policies do address this concern, they typically encourage students to discuss their housing choice with their parents while also making the point that “Students over the age of 18 are legally able to make decisions about their housing contracts.”

An uncommon policy statement about parents was, “The application process also requires that a student’s parent/guardian submit their endorsement of the arrangement or that the student complete an interview with housing staff.” Another policy noted that students under 18 would need to provide parental consent.

Roommate departure. The most thorough and fully developed GNH policies addressed the issue of roommate departure from the designated GNH space. One policy statement specified the time that the remaining roommate(s) would be given to fill the space; if the roommate(s) failed to fill the space in the allotted time, the room(s) would revert to

a single-sex designation and would be filled by housing and residence life. Other additions to a statement related to roommates included, “If no student is available to fill the space, the remaining students will be billed for the vacant space in the current suite or apartment, the prorated cost to be divided evenly among the remaining residents” and “The Residential Life Office reserves the right to place another student who has requested gender-neutral housing in the open bed.”

Using the policy to educate. A few of the policy statements went beyond delineation of policy to provide education. Educational statements addressed the history of the development of gender-neutral housing on campus, reasons for offering this housing option, and/or discussions of gender as a social construct. The following is an excerpt of an example explaining educational reasons for offering GNH to students on campus.

Gender-Neutral Housing allows for the assignment of residents to on-campus housing spaces regardless of the sex of the student. In order to assist in the development of residential students through the vectors of managing emotions, establishing identity, and developing purpose . . . the Office of Housing and Residence Life and the Division of Student Affairs recognize the need for Gender-Neutral Housing (GNH).

DISCUSSION

This study represents the first attempt at a comprehensive examination of the implementation of gender-neutral housing in higher education. Overall, the findings indicate that GNH is an evolving topic of interest, which can be seen most clearly in the findings about the extent of GNH and in the examination of

GNH policies at responding institutions.

Gender-neutral housing has been discussed or considered at most of the responding campuses (approximately 86%). In comparison, Willoughby et al. (2012) found that 41% of the institutions that they surveyed had formal or informal discussion about gender-neutral housing; after subtracting the institutions that had actually implemented it, 13% of those without GNH were having formal discussions. And while Willoughby et al. (2012) found that implementation of GNH was very limited (64 institutions), the present study identified 117 institutions (38.24%) that have implemented either a trial/pilot program or a full program. Although it may be that the passage of time between the Willoughby et al. (2012) study and the current study could account for the higher number of programs, it is more likely that the wider scope of the current study was able to capture more programs that could provide a more accurate picture of the status of GNH on college and university campuses.

An examination of policies related to gender-neutral housing reveals a range from institutions with no policies or those just beginning to work on a policy (“still learning”) to those with very detailed and well-developed policies. This is another indication of the evolving nature of gender-neutral housing. DeCoster’s (1979) study documented the evolution of coeducational housing as it was emerging in the 1970s. Gender-neutral housing may demonstrate a similar evolution. Willoughby et al. (2012) observed, “It is interesting to note that this transition [to GNH] closely mirrors that of coresidential halls that began in the 1960’s and 1970’s” (p. 744).

The geographic distribution of gender-neutral housing revealed in this study shows results similar to those of Willoughby et al. (2012), who reported that institutions on the East Coast and the West Coast were more likely to have GNH policies, that much of the current discussion about implementing GNH was taking place at Midwestern schools, and that there was “very little movement toward gender-neutral housing” in the South (p. 739). Similarly, the present study indicates that a larger percentage of institutions in the Northeast, the Mid-Atlantic, the West, and the Great Lakes had implemented trial or full programs compared to the other ACUHO-I regions. Al-

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though institutions in the Southeast reported having fewer trial/pilot or full GNH programs when compared to some of the other regions, they did report higher instances of having had informal and formal discussions about GNH as well as having explored the concept of GNH. This higher number of discussions in SEAHO region institutions may indicate that institutions in the South are exhibiting movement toward gender-neutral housing in the future.

Five barriers to implementing gender-neutral housing have been encountered to roughly the same extent: lack of suitable housing facilities, parent/family concerns, public relations concerns, lack of upper-level administrative support, and lack of expressed student interest. Miyamoto (2007) reported that campuses that had or were contemplating GNH were “wary of complaints from parents and too much publicity about the policy” (p. 47) but also reported that campuses interviewed had received “minimal” complaints from parents (p. 46). Ninety-three percent of respondents who indicated that they had some form of GNH reported that less than 25% of their on-campus residents lived in some type of gender-neutral housing, which would indicate that student interest/demand is not particularly high. These findings are consistent with those of Willoughby et al. (2012), who reported, “When universities did have anecdotal information, most universities suggested that [fewer] than 50 students a year utilized gender-neutral housing” (p. 742).

One barrier expressed by 28% of respondents in the current study concerned the existence of suitable housing facilities for implementing GNH. Despite this concern, findings indicate that all types of housing are being used for this option. Both the quantitative findings and the analysis of policies indicated that suites and apartments are the most common type of housing used for GNH, which is consistent with what Oliver and Magura (2011) reported: “Suite-style facilities are a popular option for gender-neutral housing because of the private or semi-private bathrooms” (p. 41). Krum et al. (2013) found that apartment-style housing was the most

preferred type of GNH for the college-age transgender students they studied. The preferred housing type could indicate a desire for greater privacy in bedrooms as well as bathrooms for transgender students in GNH.

Limitations

The present study represents the largest, most comprehensive, and most systematic investigation to date of gender-neutral housing implementation at colleges and universities in the U.S. However, some limitations should be noted. Non-response is the most significant limitation. Although the researchers had hoped to make some analysis of GNH in international institutions, the very small number of their responses made comparisons not possible. Similarly, the lack of respondents from Historically Black Colleges and Universities meant that at least one important segment of the higher education landscape was not represented in the findings, which limits any generalizations that could be drawn about these institutions. Because more than one response was permitted to several of the questions, overall totals frequently sum to greater than 100%, making analysis difficult. Responses to the question about housing types, drawn directly from the original DeCoster research, were particularly difficult to interpret; the survey method did not enable us to clarify with respondents what these (and other) responses meant.

Implications for Future Research

The researchers plan to build upon the findings of this study with continued follow-up to track the growth of gender-neutral housing in much the same way that DeCoster (1979) tracked the development and spread of coeducational housing options. This will enable the research-

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ers to explore the idea, also expressed by Bleiberg (2004) and Willoughby et al. (2012), that the trend of GNH may be similar to that followed by coeducational housing. Changes to the survey instrument indicated by findings in this study will be made at that time.

Given the prevalence with which “parent/family member concerns” was identified as an obstacle to the implementation of GNH, future research could explore the attitudes of parents and family members toward gender-neutral housing. Student interest and attitudes could also be studied, given that “lack of student interest” was also identified as an obstacle. Another question that could be explored is, What predicts the presence of GNH?

In addition, research should begin to explore the impact of gender-neutral housing on the students living in these housing options. Areas for exploration include retention, academic success (including GPA), sense of safety, sense of belonging, and overall satisfaction with the on-campus living experience, as well as psychosocial impacts such as the development of autonomy and mature interpersonal relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Finally, there is a need to examine GNH practices at institutions not represented in the current study, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities and institutions outside the U.S.

Implications for Practice

Whereas some institutions have very well-developed and detailed gender-neutral housing policies, others have policies that are quite rudimentary or even lack them altogether. Some institutions do not have a formal, detailed policy regarding GNH but, rather, consider requests for GNH on a case-by-case basis. Regardless

of the level of formality of these policies, it is important for institutions to acknowledge the diversity of student populations present on their campuses and to offer the opportunity for students to speak with housing professionals if they have a unique concern related to their housing assignment. For some institutions, GNH offers opportunities for increased social interaction between men and women, creating learning environments that support the overall academic missions of institutions in a manner similar to traditional classrooms and extracurricular activities and organizations (Bleiberg, 2004).

GNH has been implemented as a way to address growing concern among the LGBT population with feeling safe and comfortable living in on-campus residence hall environments (Bleiberg, 2004; Krum et al., 2013). Bleiberg (2004) noted that current housing practices utilizing single-sex roommate assignment practices may be creating environments where LGBT students feel unsafe. This is especially true for students who identify as transgender, given that these students may not necessarily identify with their biological sex and may, instead, more readily identify with the opposite gender (Krum et al., 2013). However, current assignment practices at many institutions would require that transgender students be assigned a roommate of the same biological sex, thereby potentially creating an uncomfortable living environment for ideal student growth and development. As Bleiberg (2004) stated, “Changing campus policies to accommodate for the needs and rights of LGBT students is a necessary means to assuring safety and support in students’ living environment” (p. 5).

As college and university housing departments consider future construction or renovation projects, gender-neutral housing should be a topic of discussion in facilities planning. One of the most common obstacles to establishing a GNH program in a traditional hall is the community bathroom. Considering principles of Universal Design to create facilities similar to the family bathrooms found in retail establishments that would include bathing/showering spaces would serve the needs of students with disabilities, LGBT students, and anyone who might not be comfortable using the community bathroom. Including such facilities provides greater flexibility for assignments and use of the building. Such Universal Design principle considerations are cited in *ACUHO-I Standards and Ethical Principles for College & University Housing Professionals* (ACUHO-I, 2014), in addition to the standard that college and university housing administrations “create gender-neutral specific housing where feasible” and provide facilities that are “adequate to carry out the mission including providing space for underrepresented groups” (p. 14).

As the implementation of gender-neutral housing is evolving, there is a need for sharing best practices among housing professionals. Regional and national conferences, newsletters, and websites could be used for sharing information. Unfortunately, such information is quickly outdated and requires regular updating to be useful. Particularly as institutions are attempting to launch trial programs, they need professional resources to call upon as they develop their proposals.

Finally, Willoughby et al. (2012) suggested that the most important implication for practice from their examination of gender-neutral

housing practices was the need for formal evaluation of these programs at individual institutions. They found that few institutions had undertaken any formal assessment of the impact of gender-neutral housing. It is suggested that institutions offering GNH options include assessment of the impact of this housing option on students in their regular assessment program.

CONCLUSION

Gender-neutral housing is a growing trend on U.S. college and university campuses. Prior to this study, there had been no comprehensive examination of the extent of the consideration and implementation of this housing option. Currently, GNH is being implemented in a variety of different forms at a wide range of institutional types and sizes. Gender-neutral housing is also being discussed and considered at an even wider number of campuses. Fewer than 15% of the respondents to the study indicated that there had been no conversation or consideration at all of GNH on their campuses, demonstrating that this housing option is indeed a topic of discussion on college and university campuses.

Gender-neutral housing has the potential to offer a greater sense of safety and inclusion for transgender, gender non-conforming, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual students; to provide greater flexibility in housing assignments; and to allow opportunities for broader educational experiences for many students on our campuses. It should also be noted that the presence of GNH options may influence some students' choice of college (Krum et al., 2013).

The findings of the current study show that, although not all campuses are engaged

in offering gender-neutral housing, many are in various phases of consideration. Given this reality, as GNH develops, further professional conversation, assessment, and evaluation will be needed in order to formally assess the impact of this practice on students and the overall institutional culture.

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Discussion Questions

1. What strategies might help determine the true need/interest of students for this type of housing?
2. The study revealed that GNH is oftentimes restricted to returning or upper-division students. How might you explain this restriction to a first-year student requesting a GNH assignment?
3. The researchers compared the offering of GNH at colleges and universities to the emergence of coeducational housing in the 1960s and 1970s. How are these two issues similar? How are they different?
4. This study found that 86% of responding campuses have discussed or considered gender-neutral housing but describe obstacles such as lack of suitable facilities, public relations concerns, lack of support from upper-level administration, and lack of student interest. Discuss each of these obstacles from your point of view. Select one of these obstacles and develop a communications strategy for addressing that issue.