Mackey, C., O'Malley, L., Munsell, S. & Hickey, M. (2024). Co-educational residential life: Evaluation of a pilot program. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice, 35*(2), 8-12.

Co-Educational Residential Life: Evaluation of a Pilot Program

Christi Mackey, Lori O'Malley, Sonya Munsell, and Mark Hickey

Rogers State University USA

Author Note

Christi Mackey https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7582-4623
Lori O'Malley https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0484-7201
Sonya Munsell https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9241-3387

Abstract: *This study utilized a qualitative approach to learn about a co-educational housing pilot program in a rural serving, four-year regional university in the mid-south United States. Four individuals involved in the program took part in semi-structured interviews. Open coding analysis revealed four themes: sense of belonging, learning, gender and sexuality, and secrets.*

Keywords: Co-educational; Residential; Dorms; Pilot Program

INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to share the evaluative results of a co-educational housing pilot program at a rural-serving regional university in the mid-south United States. The evaluation used interviews to understand better the program's impact on participants and the greater university community.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Historically, the standard for university housing has been separating student housing options based on binary gender assignments. This segregated housing standard involves living in residential housing spaces using a biological understanding of gender and expectations of a heteronormative society. However, this traditional residential housing option does not meet the needs of all students, particularly transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students (Nicolazzo et al., 2018).

Gender-inclusive housing (GIH) programs have been implemented at many universities to support contemporary students' needs better. According to Campus Pride, a nonprofit dedicated to creating safer higher education environments for LGTBQIA+ students, over 450 colleges and universities have (GIH) programs (2023). These housing programs vary in implementation. Some programs allow students to share the same dormitory room irrespective of gender; others allow students to live in residential suites with students of different genders but expect each student to

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christi Mackey, E-mail: cmackey@rsu.edu

have a room to themselves. GIH program availability may differ due to the limitations of living styles or predominant gender norms on university campuses. Regardless of the residential style options available, GIH programs are designed to create accessible spaces for all students regardless of gender (Taub et al., 2016). These inclusive housing programs emerged to make space for bodies that do not subscribe to the heteronormative expectations of institutional spaces.

One such university implemented a "Co-education Housing Pilot Program" to help bridge the generational expectations of university living arrangements. This pilot program was implemented in the fall of 2019 and permits upper-division and graduate students over 18 to request to reside with different gendered students. The housing units selected for this pilot are suite-like apartments with individual rooms adjoined by common living spaces. Students participating in the program cannot be married or in romantic relationships and must ensure all rooms in the suite are at capacity. If a room becomes unoccupied, the participants are expected to split the room cost or quickly fill the vacancy. If not, Residential Life reserves the right to place another student interested in the program in unoccupied rooms. No preference is given to marginalized groups, and limited spaces are reserved for the pilot program.

METHODS

Phenomenology is a modern school of philosophy seeking to explain events or states of being through the lens of the person experiencing them. In addition to being a philosophy, it is an approach and a methodology based on qualitative research (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2014). Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) have identified characteristics that set the methodology apart from the philosophy, including description, sorting, reflecting, and intentionality.

In this study, the researchers sought insight into the experience of living in a coeducational residential situation using an inductive process. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by adapting questions posed in research involving gender-inclusive housing (Marine et al., 2019). These questions included:

1. What is your year/major/academic major?
2. What is your current living situation?
    a. What are the living conditions like?
    b. Who do you live with (if you feel comfortable divulging those details)?
3. Why did you seek co-educational housing?
4. In what ways does the current housing policy/structure work for you?
    a. In what ways does it not accommodate your needs/desires?
5. How did you become aware of the co-educational housing program?
6. In what other types of housing have you lived in while you have been at RSU?
    a. How does your housing experience in co-educational housing compare to other forms of university housing that you have experienced?
7. What, if anything, do your peers say about your living situation?
    a. Can you provide an example or a specific anecdote?
8. What is the larger effect of co-educational housing on campus climate/environment?
    a. Does it have an effect?
9. How does the school administration/faculty view the co-educational housing program?
10. In your opinion, should the co-educational housing pilot program continue?
    a. Why do you believe that it should or should not?

11. What have we not asked you that is important for us to know?

All students living in the co-ed arrangement agreed to participate in the project. Included were two men and two women of varying sexual orientations. There were no transgender students involved in the project. Individual face-to-face interviews with the students were conducted, and several commonalities of content were found using open coding. Themes included *sense of belonging*, *choices, gender and sexuality,* and *secrets.*

RESULTS

SENSE OF BELONGING

All students mentioned something related to belonging, such as having group chat posts related to chores and visitors. One stated that the living situation felt "more like family" than roommates. One of the women said there was less drama in a gender-inclusive environment; she felt that having all female roommates contributed to a lot of unnecessary drama. Another said, "I'm with people I actually feel comfortable with." One of the males was specifically identified as supporting good mental health and leading others to prioritize self-care. All agreed it was "good to room with people that like, are similar to you and kind of like you." A side note that perhaps influenced this category is that all participating students were members of the honors program and colleagues in classes. However, none of them mentioned any specifics regarding this commonality.

CHOICES

While the first theme focused on commonalities, this theme featured ideas surrounding "…getting different opinions from [their] different viewpoints." Several, but not all participants, mentioned being strategic in their choices of roommates, as in, "I suck at English, so I looked for an English major…" One student said they asked a particular person to room with them, thinking they would then have technology assistance if their laptop crashed at 2 a.m. One said, "It's cool getting to know people with different backgrounds." Despite this, feelings of respect were expressed for each other's beliefs and lifestyles. Of particular interest may be the comment that this might make "…men and women a bit less awkward around living with each other."

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

"Everybody has their own reasons why they wouldn't be comfortable living with like all females or all males." For this group, it appeared that neither gender nor sexuality presented much of a problem; however, one student did speak on behalf of two roommates, saying, "[they] have reasons why they don't like living with males…" Students showed concern for what others might think of their living arrangements. For example, they noted that parents might think the reasoning behind co-ed housing was based on a student's desire for sex or that it was strange to be living with the "opposite" gender and not be in a romantic relationship. One of the residents added, "My boyfriend doesn't care that I live with two males," as she clarified relationships and ensured that all roommates spent time together. None of the roommates were in romantic relationships with each other. This would be a violation of the housing contract they each signed prior to moving in. This theme also contained aspects of the next, with comments such as "gender is just that barrier there in that housing section."

SECRETS

All students commented on how difficult it was to find out about and apply for the co-ed housing option. One student said, "It's a hard thing to stumble upon." Another said, "Most people don't even know how to sign up for it." Other comments related to the lack of publicity or common knowledge of inclusive housing options. "I don't think enough people know about it" and "most people don't even know how to sign up for it" echoed the secretive nature of the housing alternative. One student mentioned seeing "a lot of social media … none mentions [gender-inclusive] housing options". All relayed the idea of promoting the option. These students had been told about the option by other students in the honors program. One student shared the secret to finding out about the program "…people that are looking for it…the language is familiar…genderqueer, transgender or intersex…you know the language and navigate to those spaces, gender-inclusive co-ed housing…"

DISCUSSION

Student Affairs administrators and Residential Life directors across the nation have struggled with being inclusive when providing services. While most GIH residential life programs are intended to be used by transgender and gender nonconforming students to increase their level of safety and well-being, this pilot program did not appear to achieve this purpose. The pilot program was not publicized well enough or presented so LGBTQIA+ students could be aware of the option.

Those who made use of the option represented binary gender groups with variations in sexual orientation. The participants' experience in the program appeared positive, with students expressing satisfaction with campus living and community building. Being part of the pilot program enhanced the four students' respect for and understanding of diversity.

The students, as well as the researchers, determined that the program should be continued with modifications. Co-educational gender-inclusive housing should be promoted and made available not only for those in the LGBTQIA+ groups but for other groups as well. For example, siblings who are not of the same gender cannot live together in traditional residential housing but could benefit from the opportunity. Gender-inclusive housing could also provide opportunities for students with disabilities to have their care provider live with them on campus. While it is the university's responsibility to establish policies related to safety and diversity, it is also the university's responsibility to adapt policies, when needed, to the changing society around them.

REFERENCES

Campus Pride. (2023, August 14). *Colleges and Universities that Provide Gender-Inclusive Housing*. https://www.campuspride.org/tpc/gender-inclusive-housing/

Errasti-Ibarrondo B, Jordán JA, Díez-Del-Corral MP, Arantzamendi M. Conducting phenomenological research: Rationalizing the methods and rigour of the phenomenology of practice. *Journal of Advances in Nursing*. 2018 Jul;74(7):1723-1734. doi: 10.1111/jan.13569. Epub 2018 Apr 17. PMID: 29543383.

Giorgi, A., & Giorgi, B. (2003). The descriptive phenomenological psychological method. In Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design. Ed. P. Camic, J. Rhodes, & L. Yardley, Washington, DC: American Philosophical Association, 243–273.

Marine, S. B., Wagner, R., & Nicolazzo, Z. (2019). Student affairs professionals' roles in advancing gender inclusive housing: Discourses of dominance and resistance. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 12(3), 219–229. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000103

Taub, D.J., Johnson, R. B., and Reynolds, T. (2016). The implementation of gender-neutral housing: A mixed-methods study across ACUHO-I member institutions. *Journal of College and University Student Housing, 42*(2), 76-93. https://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/acuho/journal_vol42no2/index.php#/p/76