

# What to Expect in Your U.S. College Dorm

By Joni Holderman

Moving into a college dormitory can be the realization of a long-cherished dream. It can also hold many surprises, for students and parents alike.

“My mother didn’t realize until the day before I moved into a college dorm that there would be men and women living in the same building,” says Tamara Hindawi, a graduate of University of Michigan. Like many parents, Tamara’s mother was concerned about her daughter’s welfare. “It wasn’t as bad as it sounds,” Hindawi continues. Male students were confined to the first three floors of the building, while female students occupied the top three floors. “If a guy was just hanging out on the women’s floor, someone would ask him to leave.”

Most parents across the world share the same fears. They are afraid that their child’s dorm will be a hotbed of “sex, drugs and rock ‘n roll,” as the old saying goes. The music in a modern college dorm is more likely to be alternative rock, contemporary country or hip-hop, if that’s any consolation.

Here’s the good news for parents. While flirting, playing loud music and drinking alcohol probably occur in every dorm, you will also find many students studying, writing papers or debating the meaning of life. The majority of young people are just trying to get

an education, and have some fun along the way.

Dormitories are an essential part of the U.S. college experience. At many colleges, all freshmen and sophomores must live on-campus, in the dorms. They provide a place where students can live together, under the informal supervision of an RA, or Resident Assistant. Just as with any other group of strangers living together, there can be differences of opinion and adjustments to make. But there’s also a positive side to dorm life.

Often, lifelong friendships and business relationships are forged in dorms.

## Student Affairs

Most colleges have student affairs offices that help young people adjust to their new environment. Although the name of the office might vary, the mission is the same. Student Affairs offices encourage diversity by helping all types of students fit into the school. They also help the university make accommodations for many types of students, including gay and lesbian students, students of different religions and ethnic groups, and international students. Often, the student affairs office will host special events where the student body

can be exposed to the vibrant cultures represented by the international students. Usually the student affairs office will host groups of Asian American, African American and Latino students, as well as international students. Some colleges have a special office for



international students, in addition to the student affairs office.

Most universities offer a variety of religious services each week. All of the major faiths have student organizations, from the Newman House for Catholic students, to the Islamic Society of North America for Muslim students. Usually these organizations offer religious services on campus. Depending upon size, they may also offer potluck dinners, social events and charitable events.

Most colleges also have an interfaith organization. The purpose of this organization is to promote understanding between people of different faiths.

### **The Resident Assistant**

The Resident Assistant is your guide to the dorm. He or she will explain the house rules to you, and is available to help you with problems from noisy neighbors to a missing chair. RAs are not parents. They're students who have been at the college for at least one year. They receive a free room in exchange for acting as RA. They won't remind you to eat or tell you what time to go to bed. They simply answer questions and mediate disputes. If you have a problem with another student and talking about it doesn't help, discussing it with the RA would be your next step.

The RA's boss is the Resident Director. The RD is an adult employed by the university. He or she is in charge of all the university residences. In the most serious cases, the RA will refer a problem to the RD if the students can't work out a compromise.

### **The Basics: Food, Clothing and Money**

You'll eat most of your meals in the university dining hall. Dining halls are usually set up buffet-style, and offer a wide selection of foods for almost anyone's needs. You'll probably find a salad bar, as well as a steam table with hot entrees and vegetables. Many universities offer sandwiches made to order, served with soups. Depending upon the university, you may be able to select grilled fish or a stir-fry cooked to order. Some feature kiosks serving fast food like pizza, burgers

and cappuccino with pastry. Even in smaller dining halls, you will usually find a choice of meals.

Many students choose to keep some food in their dorm room, for snacks. This can also be convenient for an occasional meal if you don't want to stop studying to make a trip to the dining hall. Just don't make a practice of eating late-night peanut butter sandwiches or pizzas in your dorm room. Weight gain is so common among first-year college students that it's earned the title of the "Freshman Fifteen" – the extra 15 lbs. the average student gains during the first semester of college. Ignore the dining hall freezers full of ice cream most of the time, and concentrate on healthier foods.

It's important to keep up healthy habits while you're at school. Most universities have a health club or gym where students can swim, run on an indoor track, or lift weights. They usually also have treadmills and exercise bikes, as well as elliptical trainers. Of course, just walking or biking around a large campus will probably give you plenty of exercise. Many universities don't allow freshmen to have cars. Some have limited parking, and don't allow any students to have cars on campus.

Bring clothing for a variety of temperatures. In many parts of the U.S., it's very warm during August and September, when most colleges start classes. You can expect cooler temperatures, rain and in some locations snow, before the semester ends. It's better not to bring too many clothes, but this does require a commitment to doing your laundry every week.

Most students dress very casually for class, wearing jeans, sneakers and tee shirts or sweatshirts. One dressy outfit should be enough. Instead of spending a lot of money on clothes before you arrive, wait until you see what everyone else is wearing on campus.

You can always supplement your wardrobe with clothes purchased inexpensively near school, but avoid the overpriced tee shirts and sweatshirts in the bookstore, most of the time. It's fun to have one with your school name on it, but silly to repeatedly spend \$40 on sweatshirts just because you don't want to do a

load of laundry. You can buy a similar quality shirt at Target or Wal-mart for \$10 or less. If making regular laundry visits is a problem, bring or buy a few more clothes and lots more socks and underwear. It's also convenient to have two sets of sheets for your bed.

Many American parents joke that they only see their college-aged children when all the student's clothes are dirty. The kids return home with bags crammed with dirty laundry, for Mom to wash. If you live in Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Morocco, having Mom do your laundry can get really expensive! There are coin-operated washer and dryers in or near your dorm, so you can wash your own clothes.

Most universities today offer a combination I.D. and debit card, so there's no need for students to carry cash. This single card works everywhere on campus, from soft drink machines to the campus bookstore.

### **Your Dorm Room**

You might assume that the most prestigious universities would have the plushest dorm rooms...but you would be mistaken. Actually, Ivy League colleges are likely to be much older, and have small, cramped dorms. Some have a housing shortage that forces them to put 3 or even 4 freshmen in a large room together. Newer schools, especially in the western half of the country, will likely offer the nicest accommodations.

Your dorm room is likely to be furnished simply with two single beds and a shared dresser. You and your roommate will each have a desk and chair for studying. The space shared by two people often measures about 10 ft. by 20 ft. Each person has a small closet. In most dorms, there is a large bathroom down the hall, shared by everyone on the floor. In some university residences, a "suite" of two to four rooms shares a standard bathroom.

### **What to Pack**

Here's one tip we hear constantly from college students. Don't bring too much stuff! Especially when traveling from the Middle

East, it's a good idea to bring too little, rather than too much, with you. As one Kuwaiti student succinctly put it, "It's hard to send back a lot of stuff if you pack too much. And, dorm rooms are too small to cram with a lot of things." Plan to bring your clothing and a few essential personal items. You can purchase the rest at a discount store over time, if you decide that you really need it. Also, depending upon your home country, items purchased at home may not work in the U.S.

Waiting to make major purchases also gives you the opportunity to talk to your roommate before you buy. As long as both of you are willing to share, there's no point in having two of everything. Maybe she already has a microwave, and suggests that you get a mini-refrigerator to hold cold drinks and snacks.

A few items can be valuable to bring with you. If you already own one, an iPod can be useful at school. The ear buds allow you to listen to your choice of music, as loud as you want, without disturbing the whole dorm. They're also useful for drowning out annoying noise. Simply turn on your favorite tune or some soothing background music.

A U.S. cell phone will allow you to keep in touch with your parents and prevents arguments with your roommates about phone bills. Be sure to select a plan with reasonable international calling rates.

You will probably want a computer for school. A laptop is most convenient, because you can take it with you if you want to study at the library or in a café. Again, it's best to make this purchase in the U.S. For one thing, you're assured that your computer will be compatible with peripherals such as printers purchased there. Many schools have special arrangements with computer companies that give students discounts on computers at the beginning of the school term. Almost all dorms have free high-speed internet, and most campuses have wireless networks. Email is a great way to stay in touch with everyone at home. There are also some internet phone systems with very low prices.

A few dorm essentials can be purchased inexpensively in the states, in a discount store like Wal-Mart or Target. These include:

- Wastebasket
- Flashlight
- Flip-flops to wear in the shower
- A shower pail or plastic container to carry your soap, toothbrush, shampoo etc. to the bathroom
- A bright lamp for studying

A plastic shower caddy or other container for your toiletries will help you to arrive at the bathroom with all the essentials. It's vital to wear flip-flops in the shower, to prevent athlete's foot, an itchy rash that invades many dorm bathrooms.

Remember fire safety while you're in the dorm. Learn where the stairs and emergency exits closest to your room are. If you burn candles or incense in your room, be careful and never leave them unattended.

### **Roommates**

Learning to get along with a difficult roommate in your first year is a rite of passage at most American universities. According to one survey, 25% of new college students feel that their roommate was the worst possible choice. Probably if you conducted the same survey during the first month, 75% would hate their roommate.

Different schools use different methods to match roommates. At one point, Stanford University used to put people taking similar classes in rooms together. The theory was that two engineers or two sociology majors would have a lot in common. Today, Stanford takes the opposite tactic. They intentionally have people with different interests share a room, so that students are exposed to different points of view.

At Harvard, students fill out a lengthy housing questionnaire. Their parents are also asked to write a candid letter on their child's habits and lifestyle. The reason? University officials found that students don't always have

a realistic view of themselves. Someone who describes herself as easy-going might actually be a diva, according to her parents. A self-proclaimed "neatnik" might really be a slob, according to his mother.

### **The Housing Questionnaire**

Other schools provide one questionnaire that parents and students work on together. One way to ensure the best fit between student and dorm is to be especially careful when filling out the housing questionnaire. The university will ask you to complete a questionnaire online or on paper when you register. Supplying complete information about your habits and preferences is the best way to make sure you won't be disappointed when you actually move into your room.

The housing questionnaire will include information on a variety of likes and dislikes.

These include:

- Are you a morning person or a night owl?
- What kind of music do you prefer?
- What are your study habits?
- Are you committed to a healthy lifestyle?
- Do you need quiet to concentrate?
- Are you a slob or a very neat person?

There is so much diversity in student populations today, that most questionnaires address religious beliefs and culture. They will also have a space for any special dietary needs. Don't be shy! If you need a vegetarian diet or a quiet place to study, say so. Be aware that students who don't complete the housing questionnaire end up with whatever rooms are leftover. Don't forget this important step.

Some students prefer to share a room with someone who is a lot like them, at least on the surface. A college athlete may request another athlete for a roommate. Other students will request a roommate who is a member of the same religious, ethnic or racial group. Think carefully before you decide to take this route. Sharing space with someone who is quite different from you can be awkward at first. But, it can lead to a much deeper understanding of

each other's culture, once you make a few adjustments. Being roommates is a great way to learn that you can like someone who is very different from you.

Many students claim that colleges take a mischievous pleasure in pairing people who have wildly different personalities. Some universities do believe that having a contrast between roommates helps foster a sense of community in the school. In fact, most such pairings are simply due to chance.

There is no hard evidence that any roommate matching system is best. In fact, the common thread is that most college freshmen are unhappy with their roommates.

### **Getting Along With Your Roommate**

According to Kit Williams, former Associate Director of Residential Life at Boston University, roommate issues are one of the top problems for first-year students and their parents. Most freshmen have at least one roommate conflict, and some have many. The problem may be magnified because at some schools, three or four freshmen share a room or suite.

It's natural for parents to want to intervene in disagreements between roommates. Many parents feel that they have a lot invested in their child's education. Separated from a child for the first time, they may try to control the situation long-distance. If the roommate is interfering with their child's studies, parents want to put a stop to it. Unfortunately, it's not usually that easy. By stepping in, a parent may actually make the situation worse.

Normally, it's best to let roommates settle their own differences. After all, learning to negotiate agreements in daily life is a vital part of your education. Remember that there are two sides to every story. You may be furious because your roommate leaves his dirty socks and underwear all over the room. If you sit down and talk about it when both of you are calm, you'll learn his side of the story. Maybe his mom always put away his dirty laundry and he just forgets. On the other hand, maybe he resents you playing loud

music every night until 2 a.m., and retaliates by strewing dirty laundry around the room. Talking the problem out will usually result in a reasonable compromise. At the very least, you will each be able to express your opinion.

### **Communication**

The basic skills you'll need to get along with your roommate are the same skills that you'll need to keep the peace with anyone. These include:

- Communication
- Compromise
- Boundaries
- Space
- Understanding

Open communication is important between roommates. If you don't discuss a little problem, it may grow into a big one. When something happens, whether it's your roommate drinking all the sodas or leaving her hair care products all over the bathroom, bring it up in a tactful, non-threatening way. If it continues for weeks, your roommate is likely to feel betrayed when you finally explode in anger.

Set some boundaries to begin with. In particular, agree on which items you will share and which are private property. Maybe you'll decide that all the food in the fridge is joint property, but borrowing each other's clothes is off limits – or vice versa. Having an understanding up front will get you off on the right foot.

No matter how large or small your dorm room is, each of you needs some space to call your own. Maybe you'll agree that you each get half the dresser, your own desk and a closet. However you divide it, remember that your roommate has the right to keep his or her space in any condition that they want, as long as it's not a biohazard.

Finally, remember that your roommate has feelings, just as you do. He may have had a world-class bad day. Maybe his girlfriend broke up with him, he failed a math test and he's used up all the free minutes on his cell phone. When that happens, show some understanding. If he wants a sounding board, listen to his problems.

If he wants to be alone, go study in the library. He'll likely do the same for you, when you have a rotten day.

### **Roommate Problems**

A college dorm is basically inhabited by a huge group of strangers, all living together. If that sounds like a recipe for disaster, add to it that they are from every type of background, and hail from all over the world. In addition, they are almost all between the ages of 17 and 24. Most are living independently for the very first time, without adult supervision. Is there any wonder that minor problems arise?

One tool that is useful for many roommates is a roommate agreement. These are sometimes called a roommate contract or bill of rights. No matter what you call these written agreements, they can help the two of you get along while sharing a room. Maybe the written agreement will specify that everyone will put his own dirty laundry in the hamper, and that no loud music will be played after 10 p.m. Drafting a roommate agreement early in your relationship can ensure a smooth transition into college life for both of you.

If the two of you can't seem to reach a compromise and the problem continues, it's time to call in the Resident Assistant (RA) or the Resident Director (RD). These people are skilled in sitting down with both parties and working out your differences. Usually, the RA or RD will not remove a troublesome roommate for you. Instead, they'll often help you to work towards a solution for your problem.

What if your roommate is truly horrible? Adjustments are to be expected, but if your roommate smokes in a non-smoking room, uses drugs or keeps you up all night playing his electric guitar at top volume, something has to change. In that case, you can usually request a housing transfer. Sometimes there is a time limit on housing transfers, so it's best to act early. If your roommate is violating school rules or breaking the law, that's the time to get school administration involved.

It's normal for young people away from home to suffer a few lapses in judgment. The

college dorm is designed so their missteps can occur in a safe environment, with minimal damage. With a little planning and a bit of compromise, you'll find that living in a dorm is a rewarding part of your education in the U.S.

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