

Safe Housing Jessica Pettitt

When talking about trends in residence halls and other single gendered institutions like fraternities, sororities, athletic teams, etc., we are really trying to best prepare ourselves for the unknown. The trends, crisis or not, can range from drinking practices, eating disorders, sexual behaviors, and cultural attitudes and have both overt and covert impacts on our collective sense of community. To best foster a sense of accountability, self governance, and collective responsibility, we as professionals should consider what constitutes safe housing for all. Under the rubric of safe housing, policies, procedures, processes, facilities, programming, and services can be held to a consistent standard regardless of gender identity or expression. Because single gendered systems are the norm it is typical for policies, procedures, facilities, and programming changes to be implemented as a sort of triage response when a person comes forward as a trans person. It is important to back a few steps first to look at current protocols that currently exist and then apply the safe housing rubric system wide, not just a case by case basis. It is important to note that single gendered housing doesn't allow for safe housing in its self. A popular thought about housing, specifically for women, is that women's housing provides a sense of safety from co-educational housing. We know, based on research and every day experiences on campus, that safety is not guaranteed or even more statistically possible when following gendered divisions.

First, there needs to be an understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality as we culturally conflate these unrelated variables. Sex, simply put is a determination applied at or prior to birth based on external genitalia. Internal biological differences ranging from chromosomes and hormones to actual anatomical organs are rarely checked until evidence of puberty, fertility, or menopausal circumstances arise. The elements that make up sex characteristics are socially determined based on hormone levels, DNA, and genetic implications. Gender is a social construction that changes over time and by culture. Gender typically includes the roles one holds, how one self identifies and expresses themselves, as well as how one is perceived by others. Sexuality is more about one's relationships (emotional, sexual, spiritual, personal) with other(s).

Typically gendered institutions, like residence halls, divide those participating by assumed sex characteristics correlating with legal documents. Even more common, then is for these participants to be perceived by others congruently based on the assumptions and assigned birth sex. Basically, whether talking about a fetus or a new born, a sex marker (penis or lack there of) determines the sex of the child and this informs legal documents like birth certificates, name choices, etc. Chromosomes, hormones, internal organs, etc, are rarely checked without medical concern and life long decisions are made like residence hall assignments, pronoun choices, career paths; the list can go on and on. It is possible that a prospective or current student, alumni, faculty, staff member, or a relative of any of these people were assigned incorrectly. Because single gendered institutions don't check sex based anatomical make up of participants, we don't actually have single sex divisions (Male vs. Female), but single gendered accommodations (Masculine vs. Feminine) based on perceptions of others and the individual's self identity

disclosure. It is key that this assumption and all of its complications be fully understood before addressing campus policy and procedures let alone facilities, programming and the like. If we really wanted to “do this right,” we would have to test all participants’ hormone levels regularly and divide up accommodations based on the test results to have athletic teams, greek organizations, choirs, etc. Some, maybe not all, would consider this an invasion of privacy at minimum, so we typically stick to social norms of gender perceptions.

This brings us to the safe housing rubric. All residents, student staff, faculty in residence, facilities, maintenance, and other professional staff can expect a sense of safety while on campus, in a residence hall, and/or at work. By fostering a sense of community and collective responsibility, standards are typically developed that ensure members are safe from physical or emotional harm, mistakes can be made a learned from, and personal, moral, and identity development can occur. Trans people have the same development and community needs as any other man or woman. Those that do not affirm their birth assigned sex may come out as trans and may not. Some may look to physically alter their appearance through hormone therapy or even surgery others may not. Some may experience transition prior to arriving on campus, while on campus, or off campus while others may never tell you. Safe housing and the needs of residents, faculty, and staff are still very similar to the needs of those that do affirm the sex assignment given at birth, or cisgender residents and staff. What needs to be considered are protocols based on physical assumptions in a gender divided system?

Getting In

Whether pulling data from resumes, campus specific applications, or the Common Application used by many institutions around the country, demographic data is gleaned to allocate services and provide community based options to certain groups of applicants. Demographic data is also pulled out about the applicant’s legal guardian or parent. Housing assignments, roommate matching procedures, billing addresses, form letter greetings, and phone call salutations, preferred and legal names, to name a few, are typically determined based on this information. This demographic information may be based on legal documents that are congruent with assigned birth sex, have been updated to be congruent with the gender that a person actual identifies with, or could be incongruent with how the applicant currently or eventually self identifies. Moreover, applicants may identify in a manner that isn’t approved of or known to the guardian or parent. There may also be further complications if an applicant’s guardian or parent identify as trans. Understanding one’s sense of self is a developing process and there isn’t a set place and time for a finished resolution. Looking at these protocols first can be helpful to determine how one already navigates university systems typically based on socially acceptable assumptions. Providing space or provisions for those that don’t fit in or have special circumstances already makes for a more flexible and inclusive process. After all, we can’t provide a safe space for participants if they can’t even get through the gates.

Living In

Much like roommate matching services, there is an inevitability that some changes will need to be made. There is a rhythm during an academic semester when these changes are more likely to happen, and like trends, don't apply to all. As individuals grow, learn, explore, and develop, it is our collective responsibility to provide them with a safe space. Safe housing would provide a space for individuals to test boundaries while also developing a sense of personal accountability and self governance to others within their community. Physical and emotional needs are paid attention to and additional stimulus through exposure, educational programming, and social interaction. Additional support is given as community members face change, crisis, successes, failures, and new opportunities. When looking at physical space and other facilities in a community, kitchens, laundry services, programming and social gathering spaces, storage, showers, bathrooms, parking, and study space are considered. Which of these spaces or the use of these spaces are monitored by current practice based on sex based assumptions? How are the realities of privacy addressed? Are other options made available in an equal way to all participants? If there are single rooms, for example available to students (trans or not) that don't want roommates, how competitive are these spaces and is there pricing equity for residents that don't work well with a roommate. For applicants that do want to experience living with a roommate, are they given the option regardless of gender expression? If there are single use bathrooms and/or showers are they accessible to the community, clearly labeled, and who typically uses these spaces? These are great questions to ask when looking to provide safe housing for all within a given community space. Also, it is important to remember that personal development can include the experience of living with a roommate, sharing spaces, and making connections across a floor or even building.

Making a Home

Building a community takes time, planning, and work. A few pizzas does not a community make. When looking to provide safe housing for all participants all needs show up equally important and part of a larger culture of inclusion. Same goes for trans inclusion. This isn't about just adding words to a non-discrimination policy, or including some information in professional staff training, or even establishing a gender neutral housing option. Each of these pieces helps inform the large campus climate, but are not antidotes to a problem. There are a lot of great resources out there on building an inclusive community. Looking at Southern Oregon, University of California – Riverside, and Ithaca College just to name a few, there are different ways do including trans students, but there isn't a vaccine. There isn't anything you can do so the "problem" doesn't happen on your campus, nor can you be completely prepared by an inoculation. Every person, trans or not, has their own set of needs and our job is to provide safe housing.

To continue this conversation, feel free to contact Jess Pettitt at jess@iamsocialjustice.com and for more specific action steps and resources visit www.iamsocialjustice.com.