

## Dorm Life

According to several really important-sounding studies, first-year students living on campus perform better academically than those who live off campus. Perhaps it's because students living in dorms are closer to the things they need, like the library and the computer labs. Or maybe it's because the meal plan that comes with most dorms takes the pressure off having to forage for food, giving students more time to study. And think of all the potential study partners floating around the hallways or energetically highlighting their textbooks in the study lounge. No wonder dorm life for first years is such a good idea.

Should you live in a dorm your first year? In a word: yes. Socially, you can't beat dorm living. You'll make friends easily, commiserate about school with your dormmates, study with groups of friends, always have someone to eat with, and stay up late socializing almost every night. You will share your college experience with other people who are going through the same ups and downs, and that makes everything easier. There is great strength in numbers.

Studying can be difficult in a dorm, because socializing often takes priority over grades. But you can easily balance this by heading to the library or to a quiet study hall.

All of these advantages don't erase the fact that dorm life can be challenging. You're living in close proximity to a lot of other people, and that's a recipe for conflict. But conflict is part of life, and learning how to deal with it successfully is essential to becoming an adult.

### The Dorm

Not all dorm rooms resemble dark, damp prison cells. Some are downright luxurious, looking more like plush apartment suites than campus housing. Some colleges have a lot of money to spend on housing, and their dorms tend to be more livable, so much so that even parents are envious. Other campuses might not have the cash flow to put into the dorms, so you might find yourself living between four thickly painted cinderblock walls, with nothing but a lumpy mattress to cry on when the toilets clog up—again. But it's usually not that bleak. Sometimes when the dorms on big urban colleges fill up schools house their students in luxury hotels.

You don't have a lot of choice when it comes to where you're going to live. You will probably be asked to fill out a form indicating your housing choices. You can list your ideal dorms on campus (if you've visited or done some research), but there's no guarantee that you'll end up there. Some campuses have first-year-only dorms, in which case you'll have a better idea of where you'll end up.

### Communal Bathrooms

Communal bathrooms are, well, an experience. If you have a lot of siblings, you're not particularly shy, or you don't mind sharing your space, the communal bathroom experience shouldn't bother you too much. If you're not used to having your privacy invaded, you'll have a lot more adjusting to do. Many halls will only have one bathroom for guys and one for girls, meaning that twenty-eight girls may need to shower all at the same time. But this rarely happens. Everyone's schedule is different, so you shouldn't have to wait too long to soap up. Some bathrooms are coed, so you may be competing with everyone on the floor for mirror space.

The most important piece of equipment you'll need for your trips to the bathroom is a pair of flip-flops to protect your feet. Communal bathrooms aren't the cleanest of places, and some are downright nasty. You'll also need something to carry your toiletries and shower items to and from the bathroom. You can pick up a plastic or metal mesh basket—affectionately known as a shower caddy—at any houseware or hardware store. You'll also want a robe, because losing your towel while walking through your coed hallway can be very embarrassing.

Dorms with suite-style housing generally have bathrooms in each room, so you'll only have to share with your roommates. You'll come up with a cleaning schedule, and if all of you follow it, the bathroom should remain fungus-free.

### Noise

Unless you're on a designated quiet floor, the dorm is probably going to be very noisy. There's always a lot going on: blaring music, noisy games, television, people laughing and talking, and general mayhem in the halls. Many people leave their doors open so everyone mingles in and out of the rooms. Although most dorms insist on quiet after ten or eleven at night, your roommate might get on the phone with her best friend back home and start an hour-long conversation about chronic acne. Or, your roommate might be engaged in a hook-up session with his "girlfriend" of the week.

If you're trying to study and you're distracted by noise, pack up your study materials and head to the library or computer lab. Most dorms have quiet study rooms as well, but the quiet part isn't always enforced.

If you're trying to sleep or study, consider a portable white-noise machine. There are small units on the market that you can put in your pocket or under your pillow and listen to with earphones. It'll drown out noise with the sound of rain, a babbling brook, or any number of other nature sounds. Of course, some people find these noises annoying too. Can you study or sleep to music? Try that. Soft earplugs aren't noise-proof, but they do block a considerable amount of background noise. If you snore or are the noisy one in your room, offer to buy your roommate some earplugs, and do your best to be considerate. Just because your folks aren't screaming for you to turn the music down doesn't mean that you are entitled to blast it as loud as you want.

### Rules

Dorms have a lot of rules, especially dorms inhabited by first years. Here are some of the rules you may face in your campus housing. These vary, obviously, by school and individual dorm:

#### Common Dorm Rules

- No alcohol. Some dorms allow students who are over 21 to have alcohol in their rooms. As a first year, you are probably not over 21.
- No fire hazards. These include candles, incense, cigarettes, portable heating units, and sometimes halogen lamps and irons. Some dorms still have smoking rooms, but this is becoming less common.
- No unruly conduct. In other words, no fighting, destroying dorm property, setting off fire alarms . . . you get the idea.
- No weapons. Even paintball guns, darts, and archery equipment may be banned.
- No members of the opposite sex. In dorms that house only one gender, or on dorm floors with only one gender, there may be rules about having the opposite sex in your room past a certain hour, and some dorms don't allow the opposite sex there at all.
- No holes in the walls and ceilings. Each dorm will interpret this rule differently. Some will allow a certain number of holes, and some will allow as many thumbtacks as you want to use, but no nails.
- No pets. Leave them at home with your parents.
- No appliances. Some dorms have rules about what kinds of kitchen items you can bring. Some only allow low-wattage microwaves and coffeemakers, and others don't allow anything, not even a little fridge. Check with your dorm before you bring any appliances.
- No loud music or voices at night. Quiet hours generally start at 10 or 11 p.m. No loud music or voices after this time.
- No new roommates. No one else can live in your dorm room but you and your roommate(s).

### Dorm Security

First years often have an open-door policy in the dorm, which is a good way to encourage your local kleptomaniac to steal your stuff. Keep your door locked. If you have a desktop computer, laptop, or other electronic equipment, keep it tethered to something solid using a security cable, which you can purchase at any computer store. This doesn't absolutely prevent someone from stealing your stuff, but it's a deterrent.

A locked footlocker or small trunk is another great deterrent to theft. Stick a lamp and a couple of books on top, and you've got a nightstand that no one will suspect contains your \$1,600 laptop. This is better than a safe when it comes to dorm room security. If you bring a safe you can pretty much guarantee that a group of your dormmates are going to walk off with it as a prank. A safe is pretty easy to carry away; a locked trunk isn't. You may even be able to get a trunk with your school colors and insignia on it.

If you want to hide something small, like jewelry, money, passports, or phone cards, you can buy a diversion safe, which is a container that looks like a common household cleaner, food item, or potted plant. You can also use a hollowed-out book to hide valuables. Don't let your roommate know about your diversion safe, but make sure that he/she doesn't tamper with the container thinking that it's mayonnaise or tile cleaner.

### **Personal Safety**

Worse things can happen than someone stealing a laptop or phone cards if there's a security lapse in the dorm. Sexual assaults, battery, and worse can take place if students keep their doors and windows unlocked, or if they let strangers into the dorm when they're entering and exiting.

Campus security can be pretty good, but dorm security is often left up to the resident assistants (known as RAs), who aren't the best watchdogs. If your roommate asks you to leave the door open because he/she lost a key, suggest that you both contact your RA and get a new lock and keys immediately. It's not your problem when your roommate loses his/her keys. It is your problem when a violent stranger walks into your room at night. Also, be careful and alert when going to the communal bathroom at night.

### **Fire Safety**

Never, ever ignore a fire alarm in your dorm. Fires are very common in dorms, often caused by smoking, illegal candle use, cooking, or overloading electrical outlets. Every year students die in dorm fires because they disable the fire alarm in their rooms. Read your dorm's fire plan and get to know all of the exits. Ignoring a fire drill might be tempting, especially in the middle of the night in the winter, but you never know when it might be the real thing.

### **Surviving Your Roommate**

Many roommates become the best of friends, while many others spend the year resenting and hating one another. Some share everything; others opt for the "tape across the room" style of living, where the room is halved and neither roommate can invade the other's space. Unless you request to live with a friend, you don't know who you're going to get. But your school does its best to pair you up with someone compatible based on the survey you fill out when you apply to live in the dorms. You will probably be asked:

- If you smoke
- What time you go to bed
- What time you get up in the morning
- If you're messy or clean
- If you like to play music while studying
- What kind of music you like
- What your expectations are for school
- How you like to de-stress
- What your interests are
- If you will have a lot of guests

Your roommate will be the same gender as you unless your college is progressive and you agree to a coed suite. You won't automatically get matched with someone of the opposite sex in your first year, and you will always know ahead of time what you're signing on for when you apply to live in the dorms each subsequent year.

### **Do Unto Others . . .**

The first rule of being a good roommate is to be considerate. Yeah, we know, it's not always easy. But the best way to get what you want is to allow the other person to have what he/she wants too. It's called compromise. If you don't do anything to step on your roommate's toes, you have a lot of leverage if he/she steps on yours. Instead of living in a constant tug-of-war, be nice and accommodating from the start. If you start out on a bad note, it can last all year.

### **House Rules**

Once you've settled in, make an appointment with your roommate as soon as possible to order pizza and talk about how you're going to live together. Here are some important rules to consider:

- **The Phone.** How are you going to handle messages? What's the limit for conversations if someone is waiting for the phone? What's the cutoff time for incoming calls?
- **Noise.** What time do you turn off music? How late can you party with your friends in the room?
- **Schedule.** When do the lights go out? When do you open the curtains in the morning? When do you like to study?
- **Open door.** Is your door going to be locked or open most of the time? (We recommend locking it.)
- **Neatness.** How clean do you like your space? Will you set up a cleaning schedule and agree to pick up after yourselves?
- **Borrowing.** Are some things off-limits? Do you need to ask before borrowing something, or can you just use it? What if something gets broken or lost?
- **Food.** If there will be food in the room, are you going to split it?
- **Guests.** How long are guests allowed to stay? Where are they going to sleep? What rules will they follow?
- **Sexile.** Can you sexile your roommate for the entire night? What signal will you use?
- **Bathroom.** If you have a bathroom in your room, how will you handle sharing it? What if your schedules overlap and you both need it at the same time? What's the maximum length for showers?

Each of you should post your class, work, and practice schedules in a visible area so that everyone knows when the others are coming and going. That way you can schedule some private time in your room if you need it. But don't be shocked when your roommates don't stick to their schedules. Skipping classes and other commitments happens quite often (though we don't recommend doing it).

### **The Roommate from Hell**

Sometimes a roommate can be a nightmare. If you're really having a problem with your roommate, don't hesitate to go to your resident assistant. Often, dorms will offer mediation, or even move you if it gets really bad. You didn't come to college to be abused, demoralized, or to live in squalor. Report a problem if you're miserable. Realize that there will probably be times when you hate your roommate, and that's okay. Just don't follow through on those revenge fantasies. The feeling will most likely pass.

### **Dating in the Dorm**

What do you do when you break up with someone and then have no choice but to see that person every day? Absolutely, positively do not rush into a relationship with someone in your dorm. Get to know the person before you add any more complications to an already complicated year.

Adapted from <http://www.sparknotes.com/college/life/page11.html> on 5 November 2008