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Prof. Clauss

*Please note: I have changed the author's name. I have also changed the names of the two students interviewed for this paper. I did not change the names of any students whose words/arguments we all have access to (for instance, in The Observer's archives). --PClauss*

### Single-Sex Dorms

Situation #1: As a college student at the University of Notre Dame, I am writing to the Observer about the university's living arrangement policies. Currently, all on-campus students live in single-sex dorms, while multi-sex dorms are prohibited, or non-existent on campus. As a result, students have found it difficult to build sustainable friendships with the opposite sex. With my letter, I want to encourage the university to help bridge this gender-gap and help students build healthy relationships.

To the Observer at the University of Notre Dame-

I write to address the issue that constantly cradles the minds of all fine young scholars at this highly respected university—that of gender relations. As many students realize, from the obvious observation of life in the residence halls, there is one thing that remains absent from our dorm experience at the university—the opposite sex. Sure, students run into each other on their brisk walks to class, and they throw out a casual “hey” as they brush on past. True, there exist the two minute conversations before class begins, or the ten minute discussions on the way back to studies at home. But besides these all too brief encounters, students of opposite genders have ultimately found themselves isolated from one another by the frustrating restrictions of single-sex dorms. As students at the University of Notre Dame, we are forced into living conditions in which we have little to no interaction with the opposite sex outside of the classroom or the weekends. University curfews, pressure from our same-sex peers, and the high demands of a well respected university ultimately prevent students from creating friendships with the opposite gender. The university policies currently implemented to help eliminate this problem have become more detrimental than they have been helpful, and these same university policies are in need of a drastic change.

One of the most obvious issues that comes to mind in discussing the tension among gender relations at the University of Notre Dame is that of paretals. Not only are students limited to living in single-sex dorms, but the university has also implemented a “curfew” for the times in which a member of the opposite sex can visit a residence hall. Paretals, as listed in the student handbook *duLac*, require that members of the opposite sex only visit between the hours of 9 a.m. and 12 a.m. Sunday through Thursday and between 9 a.m. and 2 a.m. on both Friday and Saturday. So what is the university’s reasoning for this strict curfew? “To foster the personal and social development of residence hall students and at the same time respond to the safety, security and privacy needs of students sharing common living space” (duLac 107). Paretal hours are implemented to encourage members of the opposite gender to leave the dorm, to both end the night and allow members of the residence hall to sleep without distraction. Lyons Hall Resident Jane Doe tends to disagree with this justification. “If anything, they are more detrimental than they are helpful,” she says. “On the weekends, 2 o’clock will roll around and they try to encourage people to stay on campus, but because of paretals, there’s nowhere for those ‘late nighters’ to go. We’re ultimately encouraged to go off campus.” The university’s attempt at creating a safe and secure living environment is ultimately abandoned because students find other places for social interaction—places that the university has limited to no control over. Students ultimately find themselves socializing just as much, if not more, off campus as they do while at the university because of the enforcement of this policy.

This, however, is not the only issue Notre Dame students have encountered in dealing with paretals. Late night studying, for example, is forced to take place in either common rooms in the residence halls or in even more populated areas such as Reckers or LaFortune which, to some students, are located on the opposite side of campus. A study session beginning in one student’s room can be abruptly interrupted when the clock strikes twelve, forcing students to relocate their books, computers,

and bodies to an area in which they find nothing but distractions. In searching for Jane Doe to find out her opinion on the issue, I found her, past parietals, in the common room of Lyons Hall with a young, male student, attempting to study for an upcoming exam. Many other students inevitably resort to studying with only those of the same gender, to avoid this frustration.

Still, other students are convinced that parietals exist to prevent pre-marital sex as well as other activities that may go against the teachings of the Catholic Church. Freshman John Smith, a resident in Morrissey Manor, expresses his opinion on the issue: “Most of the people who come here are well aware of the school’s Catholic identity; I think that if they were to put an end to parietals, that Catholic identity not something that is going to be lost.” While many students, like Smith, understand what the policy is trying to establish, they find that it is both unnecessary and improperly enforced. “If someone is that committed to someone else staying over,” he says, “parietals aren’t going to prevent that from happening.” To students like Smith, the Catholic mentality that this university encourages is not something that is going to be lost through a change in curfew. What, instead, should be enforced are the rules that directly affect or offend the teachings of the Church in its entirety. The focus should not be on how late a person of the opposite sex is in the dorm, but what they are doing inside of the dorm. Easier solutions, such as an open door policy past certain hours, could fix such issues.

The “hook-up culture,” as is popularly discussed across campus, is yet another frustration that students face when trying to create sustainable friendships and relationships with those of the opposite gender. Required to live with those of the same sex, students find themselves creating strong bonds among those of the same sex, but not with those of the opposite. True, this may not be considered unbeneficial in its entirety. In fact, if Lyons Hall resident Jane Doe could choose between the two, she would prefer single sex dorms. “I feel like more bonding takes place,” she says. “Your dorm becomes like a sorority. You have your sisters, you have a family.” Several students also agree that having the

opposite gender living in the same dorm would only cause tension, and prevent students of the same gender from getting to know who each other really are. Students, instead, would put up a barrier and feel subconscious about projecting who they really are, for fear of rejection by the opposite sex. These same students, however, also feel that their current immersion into the Notre Dame culture has caused this biased opinion. Ali Wishon, the 2003 Gender Issues chair for Student senate, comments on the reality of the situation. “When students become too comfortable within the privacy of their single-sex dorms, they become reluctant to establish friendships outside of their dorm communities, which can really stress the interaction between the genders” (Ertel 410) she says. While strong bonds are formed between students of the same dorm, they become hesitant to venture outside of their familiar bubble to meet those of the opposite sex. The only environment in which this can take place, then, is primarily at night on the weekends. Inevitably, Wishon adds, students resort to drinking in order to socialize. “Alcohol often functions as a ‘social lubricant’ that lowers inhibitions, allowing the sexes to interact with one another more easily,” (Ertel 412). The ultimate result—hook-ups. Students find a way to justify their actions through their intoxication, but resort to shying away from the opposite sex during the week when they find that it isn’t available as an excuse. Former rector of Lyons Hall, Sr. Susan Dunn, finds that this is common among many of the students at Notre Dame. She discusses the two extremes most apparent in students throughout the university: those who participate in the hook-up culture and those who grab the ring-by-spring. “What’s missing, in my opinion, is that center ground, that middle point, the balance between that would be neither of those two things” (Ertel 413). A center ground, in fact, that is believed to be attainable through the integration of both sexes into one dorm.

While this theory, of course, does not hold true for all students at the University of Notre Dame, many wonder what it is exactly that keeps students from both healthy and friendly interactions. The majority of the students, for example, have never lived with members of the opposite sex in the past;

meeting those of the opposite sex outside of home is something they have been forced to do their entire lives. It is believed to be here, however, that underlies the problem. Mo Ertel, a former student, discusses this in his article, "Perspectives on a Problem." "A large percentage of Notre Dame students attended single-sex high schools," he says, "causing them to be relatively inexperienced in situations involving a member of the opposite sex" (Ertel 409). In his opinion, students have never been forced to have this interaction in the past; it merely has not existed. In continuing this logic, the only interaction that such students may have had in the past is with other kids they have grown up with, long before relationships became a pressure or an issue. "Others argue that 18- to 22-year-olds generally experience some amount of difficulty in relating to the opposite sex" (Ertel 409) he continues. He believes that is at this age that students feel pressured to impress the opposite sex, and here at Notre Dame, the only time to do this is on the weekends. With both genders in the same dorm, students would become comfortable living with those of the opposite sex and not constantly feel pressured to impress one another. Friendships would be more easily created and the pressure to create more of a romantic relationship would be eliminated.

The hectic schedule of an intelligent and involved Notre Dame student prevents this friendly affiliation from occurring anywhere else. As many students were highly involved and recognized in high school, they find that it is harder to grasp this similar attention amongst their peers at one of the top universities in the country. With everyone on the same playing field, students are pressured to work even harder than they had before in order to make themselves stand out from their peers. Former Rector of Pangborn Hall and director of the Gender Relations Center argues in Ertel's article that "students, feeling pressured to continue to succeed at the same heights that they achieved in high school, start to compartmentalize, leaving little, if any, room for socialization during weekdays" (Ertel 409). With a constant pressure to exceed their peers, students ultimately put their social life on the back burner.

The university policies in regards to single-sex dorms and gender relations ultimately put a strain on the relationships they are attempting to create. While single-sex dorms implement a curfew for those of the opposite gender, students find it nearly impossible to socialize during the week because of the heavy workload that takes up the majority of their day. Additionally, the pressure to impress each other on the weekends inevitably feeds into the “hook-up” culture which, to some people, is the only way to have any sort of relationship with those of the opposite sex. The heavy demands and dorm activities also fuel the impossibility of socialization with the opposite gender on the weekdays, as students feel the constant pressure to exceed their peers. The idea of dual-sex dorms is one among many of the options that would implement the opposite. Students would find time for a quick stop down the hallway, instead of a long walk across campus, to visit their friends both of the same and opposite gender. The convenience to study and eat with their opposite gender peers would become more accessible, and the frustration of ending socialization at university curfews would no longer be an issue. Students would feel less pressure to impress the opposite sex, as they would build relationships that would contain more substance than could ever be found with someone at a late night dorm party. Additionally, students of opposite genders would be able to participate in dorm activities together and help each other with their heavy workload. It becomes clear that the integration of both genders into the same hall of residency would put an end to the pressure and inconvenience of building relationships with the opposite gender outside of dorm life and in the university in its entirety.

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