

Pick and Choose

Getting a roommate is one of the first milestones of a student's campus experience. Is there a best way to manage this process and support students of color?

by Bob Gonyea, Kevin Fosnacht, and Polly Graham

A graduating senior was reflecting on her on-campus living experience when she remarked, “The first three years that I lived in a dorm with a roommate, I was miserable fairly often. I never felt like I had a safe place to return to when I just needed quiet time to relax and be in my own space. My emotional well-being definitely took a toll during those times. This year, I have been much healthier and happier than ever before because I have my own room in a house with my closest friends.”

Hers was just one of many stories collected during a recent study administered by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and sponsored by the ACUHO-I Foundation. The study, and a supplemental set of questions about housing arrangements, was given to students enrolled at 76 residential institutions, and more than 14,000 first-year students who lived on campus with at least one roommate responded. Respondents detailed how they were matched with their roommates: either assigned by the institution (whether by random assignment or through a profile process) or self-chosen (existing friends, social media, etc.). Using these results, the team gained a greater understanding of how roommate assignment methods influence interactional diversity and perceptions of the campus environment for first-year students living on campus and if these relationships differed by race/ethnicity and national origin.

The benefits of living on campus have been documented for decades, not the least of which are belonging to a community of learners, participating in support programs designed for persistence and success, and benefiting from convenient access to academic buildings and learning resources. While housing policies vary, many residential colleges and universities require living on campus for at least the first year.

In the admissions process, institutions tout the opportunity for campus residents to interact and learn alongside peers who differ in terms of race, national origin, religious beliefs, politics, or economic background. Indeed, in the residence hall, many first-year students from majority groups experience such diverse interactions for the first time. Research has shown that these experiences increase cross-cultural awareness and understanding, promote learning, and help create educated and competent citizens. As a result, institutions rightly place a premium on learning in a diverse environment and are eager to promote and celebrate opportunities for students to learn and grow on a diverse campus.

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At the same time, though, research indicates that microaggressions are common in social spaces like residence halls and often prove toxic for racial and ethnic minority students. What led to success for these students was not integration but, instead, safe counter-spaces that embraced their cultural norms rather than questioning them or mocking them. The rise in counter-spaces, such as ethnicity-based theme houses and cultural centers, highlights the need for minoritized racial and ethnic groups to share areas distinct from the dominant culture.

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The residence hall room represents a focal point of interpersonal interactions, given the shared space and the intensity of the roommate relationship. In the past decade, the rise of social media and online roommate-matching sites has changed how students find roommates, and the proportion of incoming students choosing their own preferred roommate has increased. Using social media or dedicated roommate-matching sites, prospective on-campus residents can search for a suitable match.

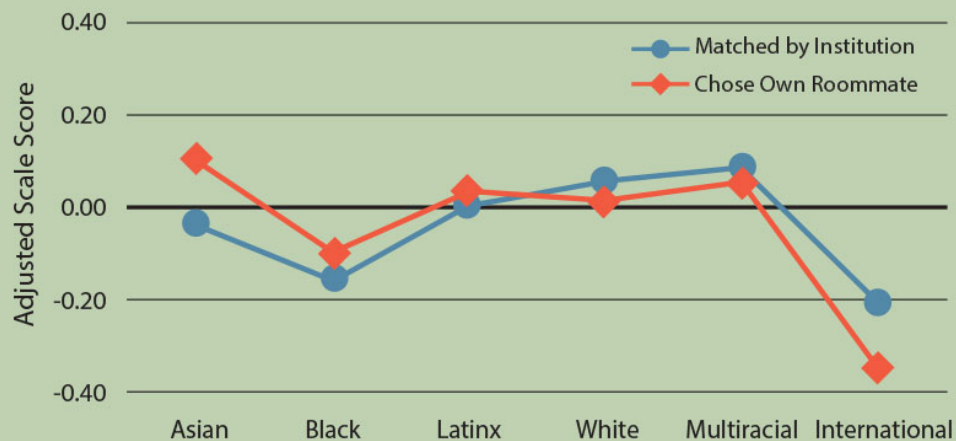
Lately, however, good intentions to promote diversity have led multiple institutions to require incoming students to have institutionally assigned roommates in the hope of increasing cross-cultural interactions among members of their student body. Previous investigations have shown that living with a student from another racial/ethnic group can lead to greater diverse interactions for white students. However, given the varying size of different racial and ethnic groups on campus, it is unclear how a blanket policy prohibiting roommate choice would influence student outcomes. Additionally, no previous work has examined how restricting roommate choice impacts minority student populations.

When considering the impact of roommate-pairing strategies, the key measures were drawn from NSSE's engagement indicators. These indicators are important dimensions of student learning and development. For example, interactional diversity was measured by "discussions with diverse others," or how often the student had discussions with people who differed from them in terms of race, economic status, religion, and politics. The "supportive environment" indicator represents how much students believed that the institution emphasizes support for academics and learning, diversity, social opportunities, overall well-being, non-academic responsibilities, campus activities, and attending events that address important issues. And the "quality of interactions" indicator represents how respondents rate their relationships with other students, academic advisors, faculty, student services staff, and other administrative staff.

In sum, students whose roommates were assigned by the institution did not interact with diverse others any more often than did those who chose their own roommates. At the same time, many students of color (in particular U.S. students who identified as Asian, black, or multiracial) who chose their own roommates perceived a substantially more welcoming campus environment than did their same-race peers who were assigned a roommate by the institution. However, the fact that students of color were significantly less likely to choose their own roommates raised a concern.

FIGURE 1

Discussions with Diverse Others and Roommate-Matching Method, by Race/Ethnicity/National Origin



Contrary to expectations and the espoused benefits of restricting roommate choice, the survey results showed no significant relationship between the method of roommate assignment and the indicator “discussions with diverse others” after holding other factors constant (Figure 1). Furthermore, this relationship did not vary by race, ethnicity, or national origin. In other words, the well-intentioned goal of increased interactional diversity was not evident for those who were matched by the institution, even for the majority white students. Of course, the residence hall social environment includes many others living on the same floor or wing with whom they share common spaces such as dining halls, lounges, study areas, and recreation rooms. Diverse interactions can also happen in those places independent of the roommate relationship. The finding suggests that the roommate relationship itself is not a necessary component of diverse interactions within the residence hall.

The association between the method of roommate assignment and the two campus environment measures – supportive environment and quality of interactions – did vary across racial, ethnic, and national origin groups (Figures 2 and 3). In short, U.S. Asian, black, and multiracial students perceived a healthier campus environment when they chose their own roommates. Therefore, choosing one’s own roommate appeared to benefit some students of color in terms of their feelings of being supported and having quality relationships with others on campus.

FIGURE 2

Supportive Environment and Roommate-Matching Method, by Race/Ethnicity/National Origin

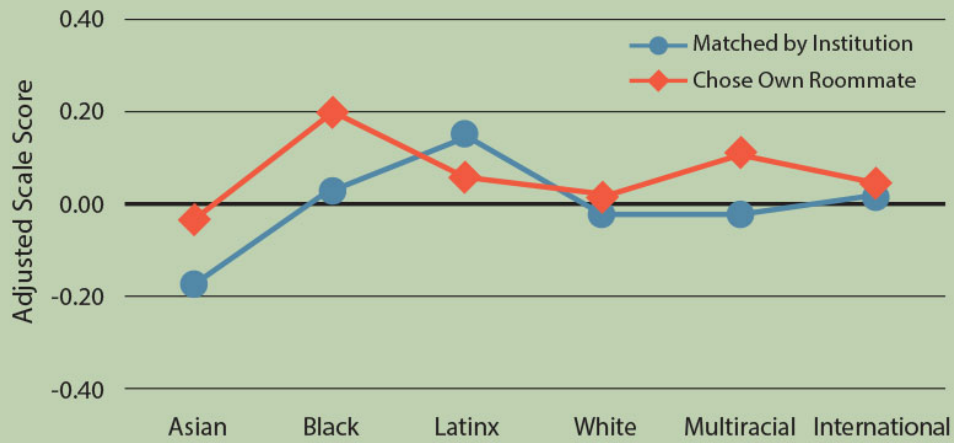
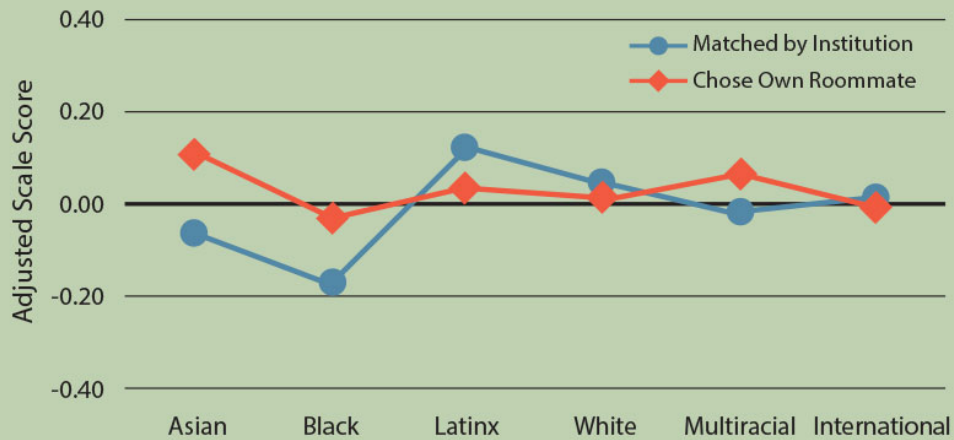


FIGURE 3


Quality of Interactions and Roommate-Matching Method, by Race/Ethnicity/National Origin



A likely reason for these findings is that rooms occupied by students of the same race act as counter-spaces that embrace the norms of their cultural communities. Additionally, these results support the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model created by Samuel D. Museus, as his concepts of cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, and culturally validating environments comport with the finding that choosing their own roommate, particularly one who shares their culture, may contribute to a greater sense of belonging. It is not clear why Latinx students do not show this same pattern, serving as a reminder that policies do not affect all underrepresented groups in the same way and that additional research is warranted.

While the results demonstrate that students of color primarily benefit from choosing their own roommates, it was white students who were substantially more likely to do so (Figure 4). A third of respondents overall chose their own roommates, but only about a quarter of Asian, black, and Latinx students selected their roommates. The reason for this disparity is uncertain, but white students were the largest racial/ethnic group in the sample, and 86% of respondents attended a predominantly white institution. Thus, white students may have had more friends and acquaintances from home communities who also enrolled at the institution. The discrepancy may also be due to differential rates of engagement in social media groups or websites for incoming students. Consequently, facilitating opportunities for students of color to choose their roommates might be an effective way to improve perceptions of the campus environment for students of color.

In the end, the study results show that preventing students from choosing their own roommates is not an effective method of increasing interactional diversity and may, instead, have negative consequences for marginalized students of color. Considering these findings, the NSSE research team created five recommendations for institutions. The first is to allow students to choose their own roommates. Second, campuses should develop ways to promote and facilitate the ability of students of color to find their own roommates. Third, campuses should cultivate and enhance programs for students of color to help them make social connections early and particularly before enrollment. Fourth, institutions must help students of color discover and create safe spaces within the residence halls and on campus in general. Finally, when considering policy changes, campuses must be aware of and take precautions against unintended consequences for students of color.

This study joins others that caution those implementing new diversity-related policies to consider the equity of impact on diverse groups, whether intended or inadvertent. Outcomes from educational practices, policies, and other experiences can vary for diverse groups, and even the most thoughtful interventions may not be experienced by all students the same way and could vary as a function of identity or background. 

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