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WOULD YOU BE COMFORTABLE LIVING WITH

SOMEONE WHO IDENTIES AS HOMOPHOBIC?

It's the Freshman Newport Getaway. I'm sitting at a restaurant on the water with about eight girls I've just met, trying my hardest to get to know them and make friends. I feel awkward, as freshmen often do, but excited. Suddenly, the conversation changes to the roommate questionnaire. People are discussing the questions, and one girl asked, "Did anyone say they would live with a gay roommate?"

For those who are unaware, the roommate questionnaire at Roger Williams University has a question that asks, "would you be comfortable living with someone who identifies as LGBTQ?" At first, I wasn't concerned by this turn in the conversation, but my discomfort grew as the girls around me said no, they wouldn't be comfortable living with a queer roommate. I kept quiet, hoping that somebody else would speak up and challenge the homophobic things these girls were saying but no one did. Every single girl seated around the table was in agreement that no, they wouldn't want an LGBTQ roommate. Even my roommate said she wouldn't. That's when I knew I was in trouble because I had recently started to identify as queer.

I've heard a lot of discussion surrounding this, specifically whether or not the "would you be comfortable living with

someone who identifies as LGBTQ?" question should be kept on the roommate questionnaire. Students have raised concerns about the question, but these students have received push back from the housing department. The administrators I've spoken to about this issue assert that the question is there as a protective measure for queer students and meets concern for every students' comfortability. I've walked away from a lot of these conversations feeling that my identity has caused an inconvenience to the housing department.

Let me be clear, my sexuality is not someone else's inconvenience. My sexual orientation has nothing to do with others besides my partner. It is a central part of my identity. It is not a choice or an alternative lifestyle. Asking a student if they would be comfortable living with someone who identifies as LGBTQ validates homophobic prejudice and discrimination. It gives people an institutional avenue to discriminate against queer folk if they want to. It allows attitudes of bias and prejudice to prevail and corroborates any subsequent discrimination towards members of the LGBTQ+ community. While DRLH is not actively discriminating against LGBTQ+ people, this question allows them to take a backseat to the discrimination of others.

The housing department could never ask if a student would be comfortable living with someone who identifies as a person of color, or if they would be comfortable living with someone who identifies as Muslim. To do so would allow students to take a position of racism and hate. So why aren't queer identities being taken under the same consideration?

I fully acknowledge that for students who elect to disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation on their housing application, this question can allow DRHL to place them in potentially more accepting living situations. However, it is important to note that the questionnaire does not explicitly ask for a person's gender identity or sexual orientation. Therefore, unless students tell them in the special considerations section of the application, Housing doesn't know for sure. I didn't identify as queer when I was filling out the boxes, but if I had I still would not have put it in my application because I don't feel the need to disclose it unless I'm asked or it comes up. Despite this, one Administrator told a group of queer students that the housing department "can usually tell who might be queer by the way they answer the other questions." This is a profoundly problematic methodology because it operates on assumptions of how queer people present themselves. Perhaps housing should spend less

time trying to weed out who is queer, and more time trying to figure out who is homophobic.

I don't want anyone to misunderstand me. Protection for queer students is highly important and taking away this question without instating something else could have devastating effects for members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially for trans and non-binary people. I recognize that much of my discussion has focused on issues of sexuality when gender identity can play an even more confusing role in housing. I want protections for members of the LGBTQ+ community that does not make it seem as though we need permission in order to exist in the same spaces as cisgender heterosexuals. I don't pretend to have the answer to how we as a college community should approach this issue, but I feel I owe it to future queer students of Roger Williams University to open up a discourse about this issue so that perhaps they can enter into a more welcoming university.

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