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## In Praise of the Rando Freshman Roommate

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**Right now, at every college in the country that randomly assigns roommates, an annual tradition is taking place: Freshmen are getting to know their roommates**

and, once an initial assessment has been completed, loudly celebrating or quietly cursing their luck. Some will feel they hit the jackpot — the roommate gods have been kind to them, offering roommates with the same taste in music as them, the same politics, the same aspirations. Perhaps their roommates, too, have significant others from high school, allowing for the hastened development of an equitable sexiling schedule.

Others, though, are facing a worst-case scenario: a roommate who has nothing — nothing — in common with them. A complete **rando**, in other words, plucked from some unknown state (or, worse, country!) and dropped inexplicably in an otherwise perfectly dorm room — someone who can't possibly relate to the aggrieved's sophisticated taste in film, to their love for early David Bowie.

Rando roommates, in short, are the subject of a million snide comments while they are using the bathroom, are carefully excluded from Saturday plans, are seen, in general, as awkward interlopers at best and pests at worst.

And they could be going extinct. As my colleague Melissa Dahl **reported in July**, colleges are embracing an app that lets incoming freshmen find and pair up with compatible (that is, similar) classmates for first-year housing. In addition, the more general trends brought about by the ultracompetitive nature of higher ed admissions these days — **ever-more luxurious campus housing** and some signs that colleges are turning toward single rooms for freshmen (are we facing “The End of the College Roommate?” **asked *The Atlantic*** in February) — also may portend doom for the rando roommate.

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**What Mismatched Roommates Teach Each Other**

“Good riddance,” scream a thousand freshmen in unison. This is unfair, though. Because when you examine this conundrum through the lens of ongoing economic, psychological, and sociological research

into how roommates affect each other's beliefs, interests, and prospects, it quickly becomes clear that rando roommates shouldn't be avoided and excluded, but rather sought out and celebrated as an important part of the college experience. It will be a shame if the rando roommate is in fact swept into history's dustbin.

Before continuing, it's worth pointing out that there was a time, not too long ago,

when it would have been hard to argue with a college freshman's desire for a roommate similar to him- or herself. Leaving for college used to mean leaving for college in a way it doesn't today — perhaps going months or longer without seeing or talking to your friends and family. Who would want to live with a rando in such trying circumstances?

Sure, kids get homesick today, but it's a homesickness tempered by Skype and Facebook and a million other ways to bridge the distance between dorm room and hometown. It's unlikely a circa-2014 college freshman will ever have to go more than a few hours without having a chance to communicate with distant loved ones. All of which only makes the rando roommate more important.

Just ask **Bruce Sacerdote**, a Dartmouth economist and one of the leading researchers into the effects college roommates have on each other. Sacerdote is a fan of random roommate assignment. Partially, that's because it's exactly the sort of event just about all social scientists love: a predictably timed injection of randomness. In what other situation could a researcher — ethically, at least — say, “Hey, let's see what happens when you have a white Midwesterner live in close quarters with a Vietnamese immigrant for a year!” Since colleges have loads of data about who kids were before they matriculated — and since it's easy to keep track of them in the years that follow — random roommate assignment is a unique opportunity to study how humans influence one another.

But beyond the social-scientific possibilities, Sacerdote's support for random-roommate assignment is idealistic. “This is one of those few times in your life where you may find yourself living with someone who is completely different,” he said. That marks a tremendous opportunity for impressionable young people, and the research has shown, convincingly, that having the right sort of roommate can expand horizons and open eyes in extremely important ways.

For example, **research by Sacerdote** (PDF) has found that roommates influence each other's decisions to join fraternities and other student organizations — groups that can have lifetime ramifications for one's friendships and wider social networks. So you might not think you have any interest in, say, reproductive rights, but when your roommate bugs you enough you go check out a meeting of a student organization dedicated to this issue, you find out it's the most fascinating, important subject in the world, and it ends up launching your career. Stuff like that doesn't happen when you're living with someone who is very

similar to you — in fact, the more different they are, the more likely you'll get yanked out of your comfort zone, which is, after all, one of the main points of college.

This logic also applies to broader, more societal-level concerns. Take race relations, for example. According to Sacerdote, "Being assigned an African-American roommate makes white students more comfortable with interracial interaction," as well as more tolerant on issues pertaining to race — a finding published in a [study](#) by MIT's Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at MIT.

In that study, interracial freshman-year roommate pairs were just as likely to end up calling each other their best college friend than same-race ones (though having a different-race roommate did not appear to be correlated with having more diverse friends in the college years overall). Sacerdote and a colleague, David Marmaros, came to similar conclusions in a [study of their own](#): Pick two white students at random and a white and black student at random, they noted, and the all-white pair will interact three times as often. "However," they write, "placing the Black and White student in the same freshman dorm increases their frequency of interaction by a factor of three." Given that 75 percent of white Americans [have social networks that are entirely white](#), there are important indicators of just how big a difference the right sort of rando roommate can make.

Or maybe you're more concerned about socioeconomic segregation. This is the pressing issue on top college campuses at the moment, wrote former Yale professor William Deresiewicz in a controversial recent [piece in \*The New Republic\*](#) excerpted [from his book](#). He argued that while Ivy League schools may appear at a superficial glance to be diverse, from an economic perspective they aren't. "Visit any elite campus across our great nation," he wrote, "and you can thrill to the heart-warming spectacle of the children of white businesspeople and professionals studying and playing alongside the children of black, Asian, and Latino businesspeople and professionals."

Here, too, the rando roommate can help fight the worst effects of self-segregation. According to Sacerdote, research shows that rooming with someone from a lower socioeconomic class "impacts your attitudes about financial aid, about redistribution," leading to greater support for policies that help close the wealth

game. It's easy to see why: Rich kids tend to come from rich towns, and as a result don't have much of a sense of what it means to struggle economically. But if you live with someone who is living financial aid check to financial aid check, things will (hopefully) snap into perspective pretty quickly.

None of this is to imply that these rando roommates exist solely as plot devices to educate their whiter or richer roommates (and they may be doing just as much griping to their friends back home about their own rando roommate — the concept of rando is, of course, relative). They, too, can derive benefits from living with someone different with them — from exposure to social networks they wouldn't have had access to otherwise (if you're a recent grad from a low-income background trying to get financial support for a business venture, imagine how much easier that will be if you roomed with the son of a hedge-fund manager your freshman year), or to the aforementioned contagious effects of interests or ideology. In many of these instances, the benefits flow in both directions.

To be sure, the case for the rando roommate depends on the rando roommate in question. For example, if your roommate is a **binge drinker** or **obsessive gamer**, it can have negative effects on your drinking habits and GPA. And it can be difficult living with someone who has, for example, severe mental illness or a tendency to blast Metallica at 4 a.m. There are roommate horror stories, to be sure, but even these tend to bring with them some important lessons about interpersonal relations. A year or two later, they usually elicit in the victim more laughter than angst.

So overall, we should celebrate the rando roommate as an important reminder of why anyone goes into college in the first place: not just for the piece of paper you get at the end, not just for the wage premium, but for a chance to graduate having learned, through mistakes and late nights and love and heartbreak, that the world is such a bigger, more complicated place than it seemed that first day of freshman orientation. These lessons are much harder to come by when college students cling fearfully to people who resemble themselves.

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