

Roommate selection: The art of the imperfect science

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KRT Campus

They seemed like the perfect college roommates, Meagan Bailey and Melissa Doss.

The UNC Charlotte education majors are both from the N.C. mountains, both country music fans who love to work out. They even took the same classes their freshman year, so they went to bed at the same time, woke up at the same time.

They had so much in common, they displayed their loathing for each other in identical ways.

The silent treatment.

"For weeks," Doss says.

And then they'd explode.

Instead of perfect first-year college roommates, they ended up a perfect example of how tough it can be for colleges to turn total strangers into friends who want to share a room the size of a closet.

This is the time of year when universities learn just how hard the matching can be. September and October, for many schools, is roommate-switching time.

Colleges try all sorts of ways to keep the time-consuming changes to a minimum.

One way is a new computer program called WebRoomz, which works something like an on-line dating service.

About a dozen schools, including UNC Greensboro, are using - or are about to try - what the Atlanta company says is the only computer program in the United States that gives students the opportunity to choose their own roommates.

For a minimum of \$35,000 colleges lease the WebRoomz program then ask students to fill out computer questionnaires about the hours they sleep, the music they listen to and how warm or cold they like their rooms.

Each student's responses are logged into the WebRoomz program with an on-line name. Those searching for roommates browse through the responses looking for the perfect match. Just to be sure, they can talk via computer, telephone or in person.

Online names protect their privacy and reduce the risk of hurt feelings. Students don't have to reveal their identities until they agree to become roommates.

"It gives the students the free-

dom to choose," says Sarah Nikirk, associate director of auxiliary services at the University of Kentucky, which is just beginning to add the program.

"They're in the driver's seat."

WebRoomz claims the program cuts down on the number of students who ask for room changes. But officials from several schools say it's too early to tell.

That's not the main reason schools use it, anyway.

"It has to do with student satisfaction," says John Campbell, director of housing and residence life at UNC Greensboro, which just began implementing WebRoomz.

"It gives the students a little more sense of control."

Most schools in the Carolinas still match roommates the old-fashioned way. Students fill out questionnaires and workers match them - by hand, in many cases.

There are dozens of variations.

UNC Charlotte, for example, asks five questions, three about smoking:

- 1) Are you a smoker?
- 2) Do you object to smoking?
- 3) Do you prefer a nonsmoking roommate?

The school also asks students if they have a preferred roommate or want to live in special housing such as the honors dorms or Greek housing.

At the other end of the spectrum is Davidson College. The private school north of Charlotte bases roommate pairings on the Myers-Briggs personality inventory along with a list of lifestyle questions (Do you study with music?) and information on students' hobbies and family living situations.

"We try not to put a member of the Brady Bunch with the only child of a single mother," says Leslie Marsicano, Davidson's director of residence life.

The system works, Marsicano says. Only four of 470 freshmen asked for room changes last year.

"When my colleagues tease me, I just remind them that we don't have the level of requests to make switches that they do at their campuses."

Students say they can't imagine any method working perfectly all the time.

"You really don't know people until you live with them," says Raechelle Berry, 19, a sophomore

social work major at UNC Charlotte.

Her freshman roommate experience was, in her words, horrible. She ended up spending much of her time with her boyfriend, Larry Owens.

His freshman roommate moved out after the two exchanged words.

The music major told Owens he couldn't sing. Owens shot back with an insult of his own. You can't play the trumpet, he told his roommate.

Nothing was the same after that.

"It's silly," Berry says, "but those are the little things that happen."

Who can predict?

Take a look at Bailey and Doss.

They toughed it out their first year and finally realized they didn't like each other because they were so much alike.

"It's like marriage," Bailey said, as the two shared lunch between classes recently.

They're sophomores now and best friends. Roommates, too.

This year, they asked to live together.

Tammy Hill works behind the scenes at Residence Life

Melanie Vogel

Reporter

Born and raised in Burlington, Tammy Hill has worked at Elon University for four years. She spent one year working in TV Services and for the past three years has answered students' questions and handled complaints in the office of Residence Life. As the secretary at Residence Life, some of her responsibilities include customer service, information management, supervising student workers and scheduling.

Hill said she wanted to work at Elon because of the beautiful campus, the endless opportunities and because everyone was so nice to her.

"In a world where there is so much ugly, it is nice to see beauty everyday when you get out of your car," she said.

In fact, she said she applied to work only at Elon because she knew it was the right place for her.

Hill said her favorite part of her job is information management, interacting with students and parents and working with the student workers.

"I love being able to tap into someone else's life, share their happiness, and be a part of their experience," she said.

Co-workers enjoy tapping into Hill's life as well.

"Tammy is a wonderful person to work with. She is very professional but also knows how to make work fun," said Christina Kane, a student worker in Residence Life.

However, working with Residence Life is not all fun and games, especially during the housing selection process in the spring.



Melanie Vogel / Photographer

Tammy Hill of Residence Life has been working at Elon for four years "I love being able to tap into someone else's life," she said.

Hill said she dislikes not being able to accommodate everyone's first choices and then having to break the news to students that they are not living in their desired location.

As for her future, Hill said she foresees many trips to Wilmington, N.C.

"My son is currently a sophomore in high school and his top choice is the University of North Carolina at Wilmington," she said.

In addition, Hill said she would like to be able to take classes at Elon and get degrees in astronomy, art and music history.

Astronomy is Hill's passion in life.

"Astronomy represents a never ending of discovery for me," she said. "I am humbled by the vastness, mystery and beauty of our universe, and will seek every opportunity to

learn more."

Hill said she also loves poetry, especially that by Lord Byron, reading books and crocheting.

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