November 19, 2013

To the Harvard undergraduate community:

In 1970, Harvard finally committed to gender integration of the Houses. Forty years later, we’re still fighting for the right to choose our roommates.

The petition to expand gender-neutral housing to all Harvard College students has gathered enough signatures to appear as a referendum on the Undergraduate Council ballot. This week, Harvard students will have the opportunity to vote on whether or not they believe that gender-neutral housing options should become a College-wide policy. If the referendum passes, the UC is expected to adopt a position in support of campus-wide gender-neutral housing.

Gender-neutral housing gives the students on this campus the choices they deserve; everyone should feel comfortable and safe in their dorms and houses. Freshman year, Harvard mandates an extensive survey for incoming students, and students are matched with roommates with whom they feel they can thrive. Harvard puts a premium on the undergraduate House life experience, and, for the following three years, the administration allows students to choose their roommates by giving them the opportunity to “block” with single- and mixed-gender groups.

The truth? If the students you choose to live with are of a different gender, Harvard backpedals. Gender-neutral housing is currently a patchwork of policies determined by individual House Masters. Two years ago, the Office of Student Life implemented a pilot program that allowed Houses to opt in to a more relaxed policy that gives students more freedom in choosing their rooms—without all the bureaucratic hassle. Moreover, House residents are already having conversations and proving to their House Masters and House administrators that gender-neutral housing is practical and safe. Not only has the program been successful logistically, students have overwhelmingly had positive experiences with their rooming situations.

Opponents of gender-neutral housing often miss the mark with their criticism, claiming that students and blocking groups will be forced to live in mixed-gender rooms. However, gender-neutral housing is truly about the freedom to choose one’s roommates and to make students feel safer and more comfortable in their own dorms. This is about more than sexuality or even gender identity—this is about freedom of association and about resolving incongruous, paternalistic
assumptions about gender-specific housing. Already, students in single-gender suites have visitors and guests from the opposite-sex; what will change about our bathrooms and rooms once different genders are allowed to live together? Harvard doesn’t regulate mixed-gender housing when we live off-campus for the summer—why should they during the school year? No student should be forced to justify their rooming choices.

The referendum on the UC ballot does not mandate gender-neutral housing for anyone—it just marks the first step in demonstrating to the administration that students care about the issue and seek to make their own decisions about who they want to live with. Approving the referendum will be the first step in assuring that all students are given the freedom to make the choices that they feel the most comfortable with.

It’s time for Harvard to move into the 21st century. Demand your right to choice by voting yes on Question One for administrative action to implement campus-wide gender-neutral housing options.

Sincerely,

Association of Black Harvard Women
BAGELS: a Queer/Jewish Group
Black Men's Forum
Black Students Association
Community of Humanists, Atheists, and Agnostics
Disability Alliance
First-Year Urban Program
Gay, Lesbian, or Whatever
Girlspot
Global Health and AIDS Coalition
Harvard College Democrats
Harvard College Munch
Harvard Dharma
Harvard-Radcliffe Asian American Association

International Women’s Rights Collective
Libertarian Forum
Manifesta Magazine
Pakistan Student Association
Progressive Jewish Alliance
Queer Students and Allies
Radcliffe Union of Students
Sustained Dialogue
Perspective Magazine
Phillips Brooks House Association
Student Labor Action Movement
Students for a Just and Stable Future
Trans Task Force
Woodbridge International Society.

A version of this open letter was published by the Queer Advisory Council in The Crimson on 11/19/2013.