

Getting to know you

Social networking helps students find the right roommate

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As freshman year approached, Montclair State University students Jenny Rich and Sam Donia wanted a certain type of roommate. Their criteria: not too high-strung, not too girlish and close enough in size that they could share clothes.

Even a few years ago, they would have had to leave such considerations to chance, relying on questionnaires colleges send out every summer to match students with similar sleeping, smoking and cleaning habits.

But like hundreds of students entering universities across the country – including North Jersey – Jenny and Sam, both 18, bypassed their school's matching service and took advantage of a new option: They found each other on the Internet.

"I didn't want to go through the stress of having a roommate I didn't like," said Sam of Washington Township in Gloucester County.

The choice seems obvious to many members of this year's freshman class, who were in fifth grade when Facebook launched in February 2004. Instead of relying on their schools to place them with total strangers, students can use social networking tools to make their own match weeks or months before they set foot on campus.

Some students find each other through Facebook groups. Others sign up for matching services (Jenny and Sam used one called Roomsurf.com) and some universities, including William Paterson, have contracts with services that students can use.

William Paterson freshman Jason Krobatsch, who is gay, said he opted to use the service because he wanted to be certain any roommate would be comfortable with his sexuality.

"I was really nervous about finding someone who was OK with that," he said. "That's not something that was on the survey."

It also provided other advantages: Jason passed over two potential matches after determining one was not interested and the other was too much of a partier before landing on Carlos Arante, with whom he seemed to click. Within a few conversations, they had determined that Jason would bring the television and a lamp, and Carlos would bring the refrigerator and the microwave.

"It was easy to communicate, and to make the transition from living at home," Carlos said.

Some critics have argued that such services could homogenize social groups on college campuses because students naturally tend to select matches who share similar interests and come from similar socioeconomic groups and races.

Dalton Conley, a sociologist and the dean of social sciences at New York University, recently wrote in an opinion piece in *The New York Times* that random roommate assignments could provide better learning experiences and better practice for future marriages. He concluded that all universities should take away roommate choice altogether.

But students and college administrators familiar with Internet matching services said such criticism overrates the experience of bunking with a stranger.

"They get enough challenges when they're here," said Patricia Whiteman, the associate director of residence life at William Paterson. "But when they first come and they don't feel comfortable [in their living situation] it could ruin their entire first year."

Even when given the option of finding matches on social networking services, many students will choose other routes, she said.

In the second year that William Paterson offered students the use of a service called roomsync.com, only 264 of 600 incoming freshmen used it, and fewer than 100 of those found a match, she said. She predicted that the number would grow as more students become aware of the service.

Students who opted against the Internet include new Montclair State roommates Marcin Rembicz and Sean Fogarty, who said they valued the experience of landing with a stranger.

"It's second nature to judge someone when you just see a picture of them on Facebook," Sean said, adding he was satisfied with his random assignment. "I wanted to get to know someone through my own eyes."

Down the hall, Jenny and Sam said that even after using the networking service, they still felt they were leaving enough up to chance.

"We could have met each other on the Internet and then not liked each other at all," Sam said.

But as soon as they met, they knew they had made the right decision, they said.

"It was kind of like we knew each other," Jenny said. "It was like, 'Oh, good. She's like what I thought she would be like.'"