Hi Alice,

I'm a new student at Columbia and have a kind of odd problem. You see, I went to a really conservative boarding school and was never very comfortable with my body (especially when it entailed someone else seeing it naked!), so this whole co-ed bathroom thing is freakin' me out! I know this is pretty silly, but every time I shower I become paranoid that a guy is on the verge of accidentally pulling back the curtain (or worse yet? can see my nude silhouette through those revealing plastic sheets). I just unpacked and classes start tomorrow so I don't want to move out of my dorm... please help or else my speedy showers are going to lead to a stinky start!

Thanks,
a prude

Answer

Dear a prude,

Welcome to New York! Unparalleled theater, art, and culinary delights await your exploration in our fair city and university, though you've stumbled upon a different peculiarity of Columbia's: the all for one, one for all, co-ed bathrooms.

Co-ed bathrooms are not uncommon, nor are your concerns over having to make use of one. Some students dislike the vulnerability they feel when showering so near the other sex. On the other hand, many undergrads support the Unified Field theory of restrooms, and embrace the added level of closeness that such sharing brings to a dorm floor.

Interestingly enough, unisex bathrooms are starting to gain momentum, as more and more universities and public institutions are taking into account the needs of the transgender population. Trans people consider their anatomical sex inconsistent with their gender and its related roles to which they identify, so picking a bathroom where they and the other patrons feel comfortable can be a difficult experience (sometimes even unsafe). Unisex facilities make this task a little easier.

Since you're currently uncomfortable with the shared space, consider these fixes for your lavatory dilemma:

- Plan your shower times when you anticipate students will not be there. Many students prize their sleep too highly to wake until the half hour before morning classes start, so
playing the early bird while you get adjusted to the co-ed bathrooms might spare you some anxiety over undesired disturbances.

- Talk with your resident adviser (RA) about coordinating with another floor so that your floor’s bathrooms are one sex, while the other floor’s are the other sex. You would need the agreement of all persons on both floors, but it might be worth trying if the restroom situation is still a bother for you.
- Sometimes there is strength in numbers. Coordinate your shower time with a friend of the same gender, so someone you know and trust will be in the bathroom with you at the same time.
- Finally, if you can't beat 'em, leave 'em. Ask the people in your housing department about switching to one of the single-sex floors in your building or moving to a different building entirely. On Columbia's campus, some residence halls have single-sex bathrooms, so a switch shouldn't be too difficult, though it might not occur until the semester's end.

Whatever your decision, try to wait a while. You will probably find that floormates of all genders respect each others' privacy. In the meantime, an artfully placed towel might allay some of your concerns about anyone catching your shadow through the curtains or accidentally wandering into your stall. While some aspects of college life definitely take time to get used to, it is important that you feel comfortable in your new living space so that you can make the most out of your college experience.

Good luck with your school year,

Alice!
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Published date: Sep 09, 2005
Last reviewed on: Jun 16, 2008
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