

CLC SUB-COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE SEVERN COMMUNITY

This report has its inception in the charge given by the president to the Campus Life Committee in respect to the co-ed Severn experiment in the summer of 1970. That charge reads as follows.

A careful evaluation will be made by the Campus Life Committee toward the end of determining the degree of success of the Severn Experiment, said evaluation to include interviews, questionnaires, staff, faculty, and student feed-back together with a report upon the activities of the House to be prepared by the Officers of the House and the Head Resident.

This report is based on the data contained in the following sources.

1. The Carl Swanson preliminary report on student opinion relating to the continuance of a Coeducational residence hall, dated October 1, 1970. (We have only those responses to questions which have bearing on the Severn experiment.)
2. The summary of the returns on Steve Crow's questionnaire which measured changes in social practices among students in Severn over the summer.
3. The summary of responses to the student-administered Severn Coed Community Evaluation-Interview Form (the "anecdotal" questionnaire).
4. The remarks of John Irvine bearing on the Severn Community contained in his letters to Dr. Chen, President Hicks, and the residents of Severn.
5. The remarks of Steve Crow and Dean Trader in an interview (taped) with the sub-committee on January 28, 1971.
6. Student sentiment about the Severn as carried to the committee by Sam Boothby, a present member of CLC and himself a resident of Severn last summer.

The data in this report has been gathered under five general headings:

1. Residents' Attitudes toward Severn Hall and Housing Policy in General
2. Student Behavior in Severn and Attitudes Toward Regulations
3. Influence of Severn dorm-life on Academic Performance
4. Psychological and Social Effects of Co-ed Living in Severn
5. Possible Qualifications to the Data Summarized Above

Residents' Attitudes Toward Severn Hall and Housing Policy in General

Severn residents enjoyed residence hall life to a greater degree than residents of the other halls. They found "significantly less interference with their relaxation, work or sleep due to noise or confusion in their hall" than did residents of other halls, though there was no significant difference reported in the amount of time the two groups of students spent studying in their living quarters (Swanson).

Severn residents took more pride in their dorm and better care of it than did residents of other (particularly, male) dorms. Severn suffered less damage and caused fewer problems for Maintenance than it had while it was a men's dorm and less than any other men's dorm on campus last summer. (This decrease in damage to co-ed dorms is reported as well by other colleges having co-ed housing.)

Severn residents viewed existing "rules and regulations as significantly more reasonable than /did/ residents of other halls" (Swanson). They showed much less interest in the revision of existing housing policies: when asked (on the Swanson questionnaire) to recommend "the most important change...for this campus," 17% of Severn students wanted "greater freedom in social rules and regulations" as opposed to 24% of students in other dorms; "16% of Severn residents felt the most important change needed would be to permit off-campus housing, whereas 36% of the other resident hall students felt this to be the most important change." "Conversely, Severn residents showed a significantly greater concern with bringing about positive changes in the academic realm and in improving communication between the administration and the students than did the residents of the other halls."

Student Behavior in Severn and Attitudes Toward Regulations

Pertinent here would seem to be the indication that Severn residents viewed rules and regulations as more reasonable than did other students. Steve Crow has a clear impression that fewer infractions of the rules took place in Severn than in the single-sex dorms. And the Severn Coed Community Evaluation-Interview response confirms this: some of the men respondents reported that "visitation /was/ not violated so much, or /one felt/ much less pressure to do so," while some women said that "Visitation violations /were/ either less or not much different" from those in single-sex dorms. John Irvine (in his letter to the residents of Severn) says of the experiment, "It seems to have demonstrated that our men and women at Kalamazoo College can take responsibility for creatively adapting to new conditions and for protecting the interests of the college during the course of a locally somewhat controversial change."

By more explicit criteria, the Swanson study indicates that "residents of Severn Hall to a greatly statistically significant degree...have less sexual relations with members of the opposite sex than do residents of the other residence halls" and that "to a significant degree...residents of the conventional residence halls smoke pot more frequently than do residents of Severn, both percentage-wise and to a greater degree by those on 'pot.'"

There is also some reason to believe (student opinion, Steve Crow's impressions, and reportage of Oberlin College's coed housing experience) that the juxtaposition of men and women in a coed dorm does not encourage sexual relationships in the dorm; in fact, there appears to operate a tendency of the opposite order. Living under one roof seems to generate a sense of family among the residents. The so-called "incest taboo" operates, and romantic attachments, among residents of the same hall, in any case, are unusual.

Influence of Severn Dorm-life on Academic Performance

No hard data on this aspect exists. A comparative grade-point-average study was discussed but not done. There is no hint from the data that study was more difficult in Severn, or distractions more pronounced, than in the other halls. Some positive evidence may reside in the responses to the Swanson questionnaire which indicate that "Severn residents find significantly less interference with their relaxation, work or sleep due to noise or confusion in their hall," and that "the residents of the conventional halls reported considerably more stress in the realm of study than those in Severn. One summer resident of Severn and a member of CLC, Sam Boothby, assigns at least part of the credit for "his best academic quarter so far" to the atmosphere and opportunity for cooperative study in Severn.

Psychological and Social Effects of Co-ed Living in Severn

Living in the coed environment of Severn seems to have fostered in the students a more congenial attitude toward the college and life on the campus in general. This is reflected in the decreased sense of dissatisfaction with the housing policy and existing regulations reported by Severn residents, by the decreased interest in the issue of off-campus housing, by the pride engendered in the residence hall, and by the evidence (Swanson) that the Severn residents "to a greatly significant degree" enjoyed dorm life more than did the residents of other halls. Swanson's survey indicates, too, though somewhat vaguely, that "students living in Severn Hall felt accepted at college more of the time and to a significant degree than did students in the other residence halls of the college." And "Severn residents showed a significantly greater concern with bringing about positive changes in the academic realm and in improving communication between the administration and the students than did the residents of the other halls." John Irvine wrote, "In no past quarter have the students in Severn been as much together, shown as much consideration of their fellow-residents, or taken as much initiative in solving the inevitable problems of dorm life. This, it seems to me, is the essence of 'community.'"

Steve Crow, summarizing the results of his questionnaire, wrote, "Above all, the hall seems to have functioned as an important social center--almost a community," Swanson reports that "residents of Severn used the residence hall lounge to visit with friends significantly more often than did these students in other residence halls." The most frequently reported benefit from the Severn arrangement was the sense of naturalness that

sprang from the informal association of men and women. This benefit extended beyond the dorm. Men and women were able to walk together to classes or to the dining hall, a form of companionship ordinarily prevented by the existing housing pattern, which brings men and women from opposite ends of the campus. The evidence of student pleasure in the matter of natural social mixing is, according to Steve Crow, "overwhelming," though there is no way to tally it.

There is also evidence (of Steve Crow's summary, for instance) that the social habits of the Severn residents were altered during the summer: small cliques tended to dissolve; intense relationships among a few gave way to expanded circles of acquaintanceship, which, it has also been suggested, endured into the senior year and made the class more cohesive than it had been before Severn.

Possible Qualifications to the Data Summarized Above

All of the data presented above seems positive; there was virtually no negative response to the Severn Experiment. In the interest of attempting objectivity, however, the sub-committee felt it should include here all of the possible circumstances that it could imagine that might qualify the results presented. They are as follows.

1. Because the residents of Severn wanted co-ed housing to continue, they may have made special efforts to see that nothing untoward occurred in Severn last summer.
2. Assuming the same desire, the responses to the questionnaires may, consciously or unconsciously, have been weighted toward the desired results.
3. Although in choosing the residents for Severn no external selection criteria were applied, it may be that certain "internal" selection procedures may have operated:
 - A. Some students who wanted residency in Severn and didn't get it had the impression that some "weeding out" of poor risks did take place.
 - B. It may be possible that some eligibles exercised self-censorship-- did not apply because they felt that they might violate the rules and so jeopardize the experiment--or perhaps because they did not want to live in a circumstance where they might be watched with untypical attention.
4. Severn may have worked well because the juniors had been abroad and already experienced an essentially co-ed situation. They brought some sophistication to the experiment and found it no great challenge to their equilibrium. (If this is so, the fact might have relevance to possible future considerations about extending co-ed housing to include underclassmen. In fact, in the Severn Coed Community Evaluation-Interview response, some

of the respondents, men and women, suggested that coed housing in future might be limited to upperclassmen. Steve Crow ventures that, were the campus to go co-ed all at once, there would probably be some problems of adjustment which might take two or three weeks to work themselves out.)

5. Some part of the enthusiastic response to Severn on the part of women might be attributable to the sheer experience of living in suites for the first time and not to the co-ed experience as such.
6. Some part of the generally good working of the experiment might be due to the fact that it took place during the summer.

Conclusions and Recommendation

The data available to the sub-committee indicates that the Severn Experiment was successful: it had numerous positive results and no discernible negative ones. Its salient accomplishment was the enrichment of the students' social lives to a degree not realized in the conventional single-sex dorms.

The subcommittee therefore recommends, ^{to the CHE} that co-ed housing at Kalamazoo College be implemented as fast as circumstances allow.