

Once empty dorm rooms now bulge

By KATHY PARRISH

Ten years ago, Oakland University was desperately trying to fill dorm beds vacated by students eager to live off-campus.

This fall, the Avon Township University has a new "Roommates Plus Club" made up of nearly 500 residents tripled in those rooms.

OU dorms — like those at many schools — are suddenly the place to be. Where students once shunned institutional living, they are now sharing desks and building lofts in order to live on campus.

"There are all kinds of bed parts in the hallways," says Doreen Bieryla, OU's Director of Residence Halls, who sees dorm overcrowding as a national trend.

"Some schools have 1,000 students on waiting lists."

Housing costs are a big reason for the popularity of dorm living. But much of the credit — or blame, depending on who you talk to — goes to housing personnel who have been relaxing rules and making dorms homier to attract residents.

"There's a trend back to on-campus living," reflects Robert Hughes, University of Michigan Director of Housing. His dorms have been mainly a commuter school. Students drive from all over the tri-county area to attend classes there — which could be a problem with high gas costs.

"Everybody I talk to is experiencing the same thing," said Hughes, who feels the big draw is economic. "Residence halls in total are a bargain. Students can live more cheaply in the dorms."

He also thinks rule changes have made a difference. "We still have a whole booklet full of rules, but the ones students found most objectionable — like no visitors of the opposite sex — are now gone."

While both overcrowded Michigan and Michigan State are residential colleges, Oakland has always been mainly a commuter school. Students drive from all over the tri-county area to attend classes there — which could be a problem with high gas costs.

Bieryla isn't sure whether gas costs are a factor, since so many of the students still have cars on campus. But she feels saving money is definitely the big attraction.

"Inexpensive student housing just isn't available in Rochester," she explains.

Tripling isn't new at Oakland, which was overcrowded in the early 1960s. Residence halls overflowed with students and two new dorms were opened in 1966 and 1968.

But nearby apartment complexes, improved freeway access and the growing number of part-time students resulted in empty rooms in the 1970s. Residence halls then were recruiting non-OU students interned at local car companies. Half of one dorm was converted into office space and double rooms were turned into singles.

"STATUS QUO was living in the dorms; students rejected that," recalls Bieryla, who came to OU in 1973 as a dorm programmer "to provide the best life experience for students."

"Since then we have really been recruiting," she adds. In 1973 there were 1,050 in the dorms. This semester 1,700 live there — 140 in over-assigned rooms.

Since then, dramatic changes have taken place in Oakland dorms. In the late 1960s, dorm residents had curfews, two food choices, stark white walls and had to hide their popcorn poppers and P.D.A. ("public display of affection").

Today there are coed floors, beer in room fridges (for those 21 and over),

stoves, jazzy wall murals and carpeting on the floors.

The housing office makes provisions for alternative lifestyles like floors for special interest groups. Students may buy housing contracts with food — or prepare their own meals in dorm kitchenettes.

"Allowing students to paint their own rooms was a big breakthrough," says Bieryla, whose office allows 10 different paint choices and is helping students build elaborate lofts in order to make their rooms more personal.

"We encouraged students to make their room environment their home because that's where they spend so much of their time."

A WIDE VARIETY of educational and social programs are offered in the dorms. Residents also take a big part in dorm decision making.

Ten years ago, decisions were made by administrators without consulting students. Now we seldom make a decision without consulting them," says Bieryla, adding:

"Eigen and 19 is a high energy level. We're capitalizing on it and directing it into productive areas."

She said making dorms less institutional has cut down on vandalism. "In theory, a person wouldn't destroy the couch in his own living room. We have many less behavior problems."

But while university officials are pleased that dorms are so popular, there are some real disadvantages. The requirement that students with less than 58 credit hours live on campus or at home obligates the dorms to take them if possible.

"To deny a student housing is sometimes denying him or her the chance to come to Oakland," explains Bieryla, who said her office was "very upfront" about the possibility of overcrowding. "We told people what would happen and told them to look around at other schools; they're offering the same package."

Students who didn't want to live in an overcrowded situation were allowed to break contracts. Each student in a triple is given a rebate of \$1 a day or \$180 each semester for the inconvenience.

Dorm personnel are working closely with residents to make crowding more bearable, encouraging lofts and providing extra study space. MANY STUDENTS have taken the opportunity to create imaginative havens for themselves.

An investment of 40 hours and about \$500 went into one dorm room, which has a dropped ceiling, beds built into the wall, a bar and an alarm system. "It's my last year here and I want to do something different," explained resident Paul Mooney, 22, a Dearborn native majoring in human resource development. "And it's much more comfortable living not like a dorm room."

A telephone booth and built-in stairway leading to a loft for sleeping adorn the room of Darrell Trimble, 20, a Rochester management student. "It's extra room and more livable," he said. "I really look forward to coming back here from home."

Bieryla acknowledges that not all students are happy with the overcrowding. "I'm not saying everyone is going around with a smile, but we're trying hard and the students realize that."

"Of course it's not their single room at home."

She's aware that with more people in the system "there will be more times when people will feel anxious."

"But I feel the approach you take makes the difference," says the administrator, who experienced overcrowding in college when she and nine other students were placed in a special dining

area in a basement with one light, no telephone and a bathroom and public telephone up one flight of stairs.

"I'M SENSITIVE to what our students are feeling. I want them to have a marvelous experience, not a bad one."

"And they are responding very well. When they say 'Why me?' I ask if they could attend school if they didn't live here and 80 percent of them say 'no.' What does the future hold for dorms? Oakland is breaking ground for a 48-apartment married student housing unit to accommodate the growing number of graduate students. A new office building will absorb the offices that now take up 250 spaces in one dorm.

But predictions of 20 percent less students by 1983 curb housing officials' enthusiasm. "It's a guessing game," says Bieryla, who anticipates residency will be 1,800 by 1981.



While Darrell Trimble, 20, of Rochester relaxes with a textbook, fellow Oakland student Curt Tabenski, 20, of Mt. Clemens tries out the bed.

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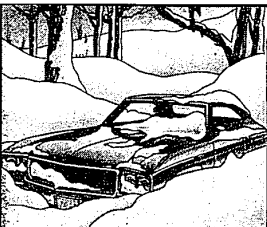
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